

VALUE OF HUMAN SUFFERING

Int.

1. Aim: To discuss human suffering and how it can help us in life.
2. "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble." Job. 14:1
3. 1 Pet. 1:6-9
 - a. Many temptations - Trying of our faith
 - b. Receiving the end of our faith - salvation of our souls
4. Many who have passed through the trials of suffering will acknowledge that they have found themselves infinitely better for the experience—bitter though it may have been.
5. Robert Browning Hamilton expressed this thought in verse:

I walked a mile with Pleasure
 She chatted all the way,
 But left me none the wiser
 For all she had to say.

I walked a mile with Sorrow
 And ne'er a word said she;
 But oh, the things I learned from her
 When Sorrow walked with me!

6. God created mankind with free will
 - a. Joshua 24:15 "And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD"
 - b. This free will enables human beings to make their own choices.
 - c. Foolish choices can have devastating consequences like, suffering. Thus, the responsibility for unwise choices is man's, not God's.
7. We will see the benefits that suffering can provide—if we are wise enough to learn the lessons.

Discussion

I. WE ARE FRAIL HUMAN BEINGS

- A. Suffering highlights the fact that we are frail human beings; that is to say, we are not God.
1. Some, however, have no greater ambition than to be their own God. They are "autotheists" — self-gods.
 2. They imagine that they are accountable to no one higher than themselves.
 3. To borrow the words of the infidel poet, William Ernest Henley, they are the masters of their fate, and the captains of their souls!
 4. These rebels submit to no law save the self-imposed law of their own arrogant minds.
- B. But when we humans suffer, we are forced to focus upon our own weakness.
1. There is no remedy within us - Job 6:13 "Is not my help in me? and is wisdom driven quite from me?"
 2. It is hard to be haughty when you are hurting.
 3. Pain can be humbling; it can slap smart-aleckness out of us, and open our hearts to greater vistas.

II. DRAW OUR INTERESTS TOWARD THE TRUE GOD

- A. Second, suffering can draw our interests toward the true God.
1. When one is in a state of anguish that offers little relief, the natural inclination is to turn toward a higher source for help.
 2. Only a deliberate and forced stubbornness can quench that urge.

3. When we are hurting, the "God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:3) is waiting to help.
- B. Suffering can get our attention! David once wrote: "In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried unto my God: he heard my voice out of his temple, and my cry came before him, even into his ears." Psalm 18:6 Distress = trouble, a tight place

III. SEE SIN FOR WHAT IT REALLY IS

- A. Third, suffering can help us to see sin in all of its repulsive ways
1. The Bible clearly teaches that this planet has been heir to suffering as a consequence of man's sin.
 2. This principle is set forth clearly by Paul in his letter to the Roman saints. He affirmed that "through one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death through sin, so that death passed to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).
- B. At the beginning of human history, sin, in a manner of speaking, was "crouching at the door" (see Genesis 4:7); when grandmother Eve (and subsequently her husband) opened that door, horrible effects were allowed to descend upon their offspring (Genesis 3:22).
1. And so death—with all its attendant evils—entered the human environment as a result of man's rebellion against his Creator.
 2. When we suffer, it ought to be a sober reminder of how terrible sin is.
 3. While we cannot escape the physical consequences of sin's high price, we can refresh our souls in divine forgiveness.
 4. When that is done, life becomes much easier.

IV. HELPS US SEE THE REAL WORTH OF THINGS

- A. Fourth, suffering aids us in seeing the real worth of things.
1. When one passes through the experience of intense suffering, and perhaps comes to the threshold of death, the entire world can take on new meaning.
 2. The singing of the birds is more beautiful than it ever has been.
 3. A fresh spring day makes the soul ecstatic.
 4. Family and friends take on a new preciousness.
- B. Indeed, suffering can provide a sharper vision of life's priorities. As the poet John Dryden expressed it: "We, by our suff'rings, learn to prize our bliss" (*Astraea Redux*).
- C. He that hath an ear, let him hear what suffering whispers to the soul.

V. PREPARES US TO BE COMPASSIONATE TO OTHERS

- A. Fifth, suffering prepares us to be compassionate to others.
1. There is an old adage that says, "Do not judge a man until you've walked a mile in his shoes."
 2. I suggest another proverb: "One cannot comfort effectively until he has lain in the bed of suffering."
 3. That may be a bit of an overstatement, but it contains a grain of truth.

- B. In the second chapter of Hebrews, the writer effectively argued that Jesus Christ, as our High Priest, is qualified to "succor" (ASV) or "aid" (NASV) those who are tempted. - relieve
1. How is that so?
 2. Hear him: "For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted" (Hebrews 2:18, NKJV).
 3. The song lyric, "Are you weary? Are you heavyhearted? Tell it to Jesus; tell it to Jesus," is wonderfully meaningful in light of this passage. # 542
 4. There is a difference between "sympathy" and "empathy"
 - a. Sympathy is when one "feels with" (i.e., has feelings of tenderness for) those who suffer,
 - b. But "empathy" is when one is able to "get inside" the friend who suffers, because the one doing the comforting has been there!
 - c. Sympathy is understanding someone is upset and appreciating that fact that they are upset. Empathy is knowing why they are upset.
 - d. Empathy can only be felt when you have experienced the same as the person you are empathizing with....an example...if a parent loses a child but you have not...you can only sympathize with that person...if you have lost a child too you can then empathize with that person.
 5. Suffering helps us to be more compassionate to others.

VI. HELPS US SEE THAT EARTH IS NOT A PERMANENT HOME

- A. Sixth, suffering sharpens our awareness that this Earth is not a permanent home.
1. Peter sought to encourage early Christians (who were being persecuted) not to despair, by reminding them that they were but "sojourners and pilgrims" upon this Earth (1 Peter 2:11).
 2. The ancient patriarchs "confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" and so they looked for "a better country, that is a heavenly [one]" (Hebrews 11:13-16).
 3. Paul reminded us that "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us-ward" (Romans 8:18).
 4. Song # 979 Poor Wayfaring Stranger
- B. It is not the will of God that men live upon this evil-plagued planet forever.
1. We never will be "at home" until we are with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8), and suffering helps make us "home sick."
 2. Henry Ward Beecher once said: "God washes the eyes by tears until they can behold the invisible land where tears shall come no more."

VII. HELPS US TO PRAY

- A. Seventh, suffering enhances our ability to pray.
1. Praying is an instinctive human response to severe hardship.
 2. But effective prayer is a learned exercise.
 3. On a certain occasion during His ministry, Jesus was praying. After He had finished, one of the disciples requested of Him: "Lord, teach us to pray, even as John also taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1).

4. These Hebrew disciples had been praying all their lives; yet, they observed something in the intensity of Jesus' prayers that sent them "back to school."
- B. With Calvary ever looming before Him, Christ plumbed the depths of prayer.
1. Note the following: "And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became as it were great drops of blood falling down upon the ground" (Luke 22:44).
 2. A song suggests: "Pray when you're happy; pray when in sorrow." # 821
 3. One should pray frequently, and in all moods; under the burden of suffering, however, one will learn how to pray as he never has prayed before.

VIII. PREPARES THE SOUL FOR ETERNITY

- A. Eighth, suffering tempers the soul and helps prepare it for eternity.
1. Peter wrote: "[N]ow for a little while, if necessary, ye have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:6-7).
 2. Just as precious metals are purified by the heat of fire, so life's trials in general, and suffering for Christ in particular, build strength into the soul.
- B. Character does not happen by accident; rather, it is built! Out of the fires of suffering, the human spirit may emerge as precious as gold and as strong as steel.

IX. **Makes us better**

- A. Ninth, suffering nurtures the noblest virtues of which mankind is capable.
1. Reflect for a moment upon the quality of courage.
 2. Civilizations universally perceive "courage" to be one of the prime traits of humanity, and, by way of contrast, cowardice is considered to be utterly reprehensible.
 3. Courage may be defined as the ability to act rationally in the face of fear.
- B. If, however, the human family were immune to hardship, danger, suffering, etc., there could be no "facing" it, hence, no courage.
1. When we sit down to a delicious dinner with friends and loved ones on a balmy autumn evening, no courage is needed.
 2. Courage arises in the presence of danger.
 3. There are certain qualities that we simply cannot possess in the absence of hardship.
 4. Ralph Sockman wrote: "Without danger there would be no adventure. Without friction our cars would not start and our spirits would not soar. Without tears, eyes would not shine with the richest expressions" (1961, p. 66).
 5. And what of "patience"? John Chrysostom (347-407), one of the most influential figures among the "church fathers" of the post-apostolic period, described patience as "the mother of piety, fruit that never withers, a fortress that is never taken, a harbour that knows no storms" (as quoted in Barclay, 1974, p. 145).
 6. But could there ever be "patience" in the absence of difficulty?

X. Separates the Weak from the Strong

- A. Tenth, suffering separates the superficial from the stable.
1. Paul cautioned the Corinthian saints against building up the church superficially.
 2. Some folks are of the "wood, hay, [and] stubble" variety, while others exhibit those qualities of "gold, silver [and] costly stones" (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).
 3. Saints of the latter category endure; those of the former do not. Why so?
- B. It simply is because the two groups are tested by "fire" (hardships), and that testing fire separates quality converts from those who really are not serious about their Christian commitment.
1. Jesus once spoke of those who receive the gospel impulsively, and, for a while endure.
 2. Eventually, though, "tribulation and persecution" arise, and rather quickly the superficial fade away - Luke 8:13

CONCLUSION

1. And so, while no one actively seeks suffering in his life, honesty compels us to admit that hardships do have value—great value.
2. Certainly, the existence of suffering is not a valid reason for rejecting the Creator.

Sources

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Sermon by Arthur Pigman - Sunday Morning August 30, 2009
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