

humility in suffering



Imagine that you have committed yourself to God and have for years sought to walk with him and live in his ways. Then illness befalls you. You are chastened on a bed of pain. You have constant distress in your bones. You find food repulsive. Your soul loathes the choicest of foods. Your flesh begins to waste away. Your bones, once concealed under healthy flesh and muscle, now protrude. It is difficult for your family and friends to look upon you. This description of suffering is found in what may be the Bible's oldest book, the book of Job (33:19-22).

Or imagine that you have made the decision to follow Jesus Christ, but in the country where you live, that decision is not welcomed and not tolerated. Your property is confiscated. You are excluded from the community. Your parents hate you for what you have done. You are eventually arrested, tortured and placed in prison. Some of your brothers in the faith are killed and even dismembered. Such things have happened. The Bible refers to them all (see Matthew 10:21-22, Hebrews 10:34, John 16:2, Hebrews 11:35-37). Some of them are happening to Christians even as we write. How does one respond when such things take place? What do such things as these, and dozens of forms of suffering, have to do with pride and humility? A more careful look at Job's story can give us some valuable insights.

Satan's Attack

Satan argued to God that Job was a blameless and upright man, primarily because everything was going well in his life. After all he had had seven sons and three daughters, seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys and a large number of servants. He was considered the greatest man among all the people of the East. Beyond that, his children just had one party after another (Job 1:2-4). In our day Job might have owned several large companies, a great deal of stock, a private plane and a place in Aspen. His children would have been known for their style. "Sure, he has a great attitude," argued Satan. "Everything is great."

And so God allowed Satan to afflict Job. The results of the early battles must have discouraged the enemy. All in one day Job's oxen and donkeys were stolen, his sheep and servants were struck by lightning, and all died, save one. His camels were stolen, and the servants caring for them were all slashed to death, save one. A violent windstorm struck the house where all his sons and daughters were having a party, and they all died (Job 1:13-19). And then we read:

At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said:

"Naked I came from my mother's womb,
and naked I will depart.
The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;
may the name of the Lord be praised."
In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with
wrongdoing. (Job 1:20-22)

With a remarkable humility and a remarkable faith, Job accepted the suffering. He did not understand it. His pain was certainly not eased, but he bowed before God, and in so many words said, "I still trust you."

The Pain Intensifies

But then the enemy turned up the heat. Job's internal suffering was now matched by the external kind. Painful sores covered him from head to toe. Such was his agony that he sat in ashes and scraped himself with broken pottery (Job 2:7-8). But it still looked as though he would pass the test. He got no help from a wife who would never make the faith Hall of Fame. Her advice (apparently given because it would be better for him and better for her): "Curse God and die." But Job was proving to be a formidable opponent, staying humble in the storms of life:

He replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?"
In all this, Job did not sin in what he said. (Job 2:10)

However, as the suffering wore on day after day, it began to take its toll, and finally Job cursed the day of his birth. He did not fully take his wife's advice, but he did start down the road toward bitterness. Hours of discussions with friends followed, but Job eventually took the position that God was most unfair, and he protested vehemently to his Maker. Typical is this line from 7:11:

"Therefore I will not keep silent;
I will speak out in the anguish of my spirit,
I will complain in the bitterness of my soul."

Let me ask you to think about something. How do you react to Job's situation? Do you think it was inevitable that he would come to this point? Do you think: *That is certainly the way I would have reacted?* Do you so identify with Job's suffering that you, too, begin to question God?

This is definitely the effect that suffering has on us. In the midst of suffering, it is not uncommon for us to feel that we certainly know better than God what ought to be done. Our

pain rivets our attention inward. We cry out for relief. We cannot understand how a powerful and loving God would allow us to stay at this point.

When my first major multiple sclerosis (MS) attack came eight years ago, like Job, I did rather well in the early going, but then as the effects of the illness wore on me day after day, and I considered the years of challenge that were before me, I questioned if I wanted to live. It is remarkable to me now that I felt this way, but that is where I was at the time. From when I got up to when I went to sleep, it was difficult for me not to be consumed with my illness. Even my sleep was no longer normal. It was a twenty-four-hour-a-day problem. My heart and my faith were tested.

Coming Back to God

But you must not feel sorry for me, or for Job, or for thousands of people facing all kinds of trials and different forms of suffering—physical or emotional. God is still faithful. And he has not lost control. In his early response, Job was on track:

"Naked I came from my mother's womb,
and naked I will depart.

The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;
may the name of the Lord be praised." (Job 1:20)

In the face of his suffering, he acknowledged two things:

1. *God is still God.* God has always been. He was there long before Job and long before Job's situation developed, and nothing that happens in any of our lives changes the reality of God or the nature of his character. It is interesting how some of us will have faith in him even though we live in a suffering-filled world. But as soon as that suffering comes under our roof, we doubt God or his faithfulness. Do we somehow think that what happens to us changes something about God?

2. *Man is still the dependent, precarious human being he has always been.* "Naked I came...and naked I will depart." Job

knew that, even if he was the richest man in the East, he was still as the grass and the wildflowers: Here today and gone tomorrow.

And then Job did something else: *He praised God.* Sure, this is easier to do when all is well with us. When I wrote the first draft of this chapter, I was at a beautiful spot in northern New England where I like to go when isolation is needed. The water in front of the house was glassy, reflecting the mountains. It was an idyllic scene. The temperature was perfect. I had just eaten some delicious lasagna my wife had sent along. I felt relatively good that day, physically. A phone call had confirmed that a recently made decision was working out well. It was easy to give praise to God.

Today, as I make some revisions to this chapter, several people close to me are in a lot of pain and are, like Job, mystified by what they are going through. It has rained for four days straight with more predicted. The offices of seven of our staff members have flooded. That decision I referred to, which was made earlier, now appears to not be working out after all.

The truth is that today presents me a greater opportunity to show humility than that perfect day two months ago. When we suffer, we find out where we really are, and we learn lessons we never learned while all was comfortable. If our humility cannot pass the test of suffering, wasn't it just a disguise? Isn't it better that we find that out before it is too late to do something about it? If we say, "I don't deserve this kind of pain," we should stop and listen, and learn something very important about ourselves. We are a long way from the cross, a long way from dying to self. Our suffering has revealed that we are much more self-absorbed than we have thought. Nothing confronts us with our true selves like suffering. Suffering exposes the self-righteousness, arrogance and ingratitude that has been lodging somewhere in the recesses of our hearts. Suffering does not produce these things. It only reveals what is already there. No wonder God allows us to go through some tough things.

The truly humble person, the person who stands in awe before God, will make it through the tests of suffering and be stronger on the other side. He may struggle and wrestle with God, but ultimately, he will come back to God in full surrender like Job did:

Then Job replied to the Lord:

"I know that you can do all things;
no plan of yours can be thwarted.
You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my
counsel without knowledge?'
Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me to know." (Job 42:1-3)

Years ago I heard a man talk about King David and all of his ups and downs. He said that while David made his share of mistakes, his redeeming character trait was *spiritual allegiance*. No matter what he went through or how many times he failed, he always came back to God. And that is what Job did. He had his good moments and then a lot of bad ones. The man who looked faithful and humble at first just overflowed with self-righteousness and bitterness later. But in the end he was humble. He stopped blaming and accusing God, and he said, "I spoke too soon. I said too much." As he humbled himself, he once again saw the blessings of God.

To humble ourselves in our suffering means to accept that suffering and allow God to teach us any lesson that we need to learn (and there will usually be several).

There is an old saying that goes like this: "Difficulty is the very atmosphere of miracle." None of us welcomes suffering. Few of us are immediately or consistently humble in the face of it. However, if we will come to God in our pain with teachable and open hearts, we may yet see miracles.

▪ Thought Question ▪

What has suffering taught you about your own heart?