

Meditation: Why Do Bad Things Happen to God's People?

By Rev. Peter Hastie

One of the most important duties belonging to the church is to preserve and re-tell the stories of the suffering of God saints. This is why the writer to the Hebrews says: 'Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith' (13:7).

Now one of the most important aspects of imitating Christian leaders' lives is to see how they dealt with suffering. How did they face it? What place did it have in their lives? How did they understand its purpose? These questions are particularly relevant when we study the life on the apostle Paul.

Of course, Paul is famous for some of his statements about how to handle suffering. For instance, he told the Ephesians that whether we are talking about suffering that comes from sickness or injury, disaster or persecution, 'God works out everything in conformity with the counsel of His will' (Eph 1:11). And to the Roman Christians he added: 'God causes everything to work together for good for those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose' (Rom 8:28). And this includes sickness, suffering, accidents and opposition. And it is in the story of Paul's final journey from Caesarea to Rome in Acts 27-28 that we see how Paul understood this theology as he faced one crisis after another.

Now we shouldn't pretend that everyone agrees with Paul's understanding of how to deal with suffering.

For instance, William Barclay, a former Scottish Bible scholar, was adamantly opposed to Paul's view. He says in his *Spiritual Autobiography*, 'I believe that pain and suffering are never the will of God for his children... I cannot conceive that such things are God's will under any circumstances.'

Is Barclay right? Could Paul be like a little boy whistling in the dark trying to suppress his fears? Or is Paul telling us the truth that God often comes to us and reveals Himself, not in the circumstances of our triumphs, prosperity and success, but precisely in those moments of our lives where we feel abandoned, lost and wounded? Isn't this what happened to Jesus? He was crucified in weakness, but was raised from the dead in power. After all, it was through the sufferings of Christ that God revealed His love towards mankind and His plan to save us. And in Acts 27:1-8, Paul tells us that it was through his sufferings for Christ—particularly this dangerous sea voyage—that God's plan to bring eternal life to the nations was accomplished. That's why it is so important that we understand place of suffering in our own lives. Do we understand this vital principle that we will often face suffering and adversity at the precise moment when we are trying to do God's will?

Of course, if we are to appreciate this truth, we need to understand that when Paul was taken prisoner and conveyed by ship to Rome, he was actually engaged in fulfilling God's purpose for his life. He had longed for a number of years to visit the church in Rome and to preach the Gospel there (Rom 15:23-24, 28-29; Acts

19:21). After all, Rome was the strategic centre of the Empire and Paul wanted to strengthen the church there. However, he was also aware that he would face prison and hardship along the way (Acts 20:23). God later confirmed to him that he would go to Rome through a direct revelation (Acts 23:11) and then through the Roman governor, Festus (Acts 25:12). Then, finally, an angel of the Lord confirmed that he would survive just when he thought that he would die at sea in a terrifying storm (Acts 27:23-24).

Interestingly, we get an idea of the adversity that Paul faced as soon as he began his voyage. The trip began uneventfully on the first day, but when they set out from Sidon the weather changed for the worse– ‘the winds were against us’ (Acts 27:4). The ship then ventured into the ‘deep sea’ off the coast of Cilicia and made slow headway for many days and was blown off-course (27:5-7). As they continued their journey they had great difficulty and it became dangerous to continue. Paul warned them of the risk but they pressed on nonetheless (27:10-12).

I find it particularly interesting that as Paul was fulfilling God’s plan for him to go to Rome, he encountered so much hardship and danger. This all came to a climax in a terrible storm off the coast of Malta. It lasted for two weeks during which time they had no food to eat. Finally, the ship ran aground and the pounding surf smashed it to pieces (27:27-44). The 276 passengers and crew managed to make it ashore. All were saved. The angel’s promise to Paul was fulfilled (27:23-4). Then three months later, they finally arrived in Rome.

What is Luke telling us here? I think he’s reminding us that Christians are not exempt from trials and suffering if we are intent on doing the will of God. Paul’s experience of striking trouble at sea, as well as the disciples’ experience of crisis and helplessness on the lake of Galilee, remind us that when we are doing the will of God we should expect hardships and painful trials as part of our experience.

It’s a truth that Martin Luther called the ‘theology of the cross’. Why does God bring us through painful and humiliating circumstances after we have been saved? Luther sends us for an answer to the cross where God achieves His greatest feat through the suffering and shame of Christ. On the cross Christ seemed defeated, powerless and scorned. However, this is where God’s love and grace were fully revealed – in the midst of Christ’s weakness. And God taught Paul an important lesson: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Cor 12:9).

Christ’s death on the cross to save sinners and defeat Satan is a paradox that those who want a prosperous and successful life fail to understand. Christ achieved the impossible on Calvary when He died in apparent weakness for our sins. And this fact reveals a vital truth: that if we are to live life to the full (John 10:10), it only comes about in a totally surprising and scandalous way, through what Jesus accomplished on the cross. The cross is Christian’s pattern of life and service through which God demonstrates His power. Luther was simply

reaffirming what Paul had discovered long before, that the path to glory is through suffering and weakness (1 Cor 15:43; 2 Cor 13:4; Heb 11:34).

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