

Dealing with Suffering, part 1
May 6, 2018

Some of you will remember seeing a picture from the Vietnam War. Some of you have seen the picture many times. It shows a small, naked, nine year old girl. She is walking down the middle of the street, arms stretched out, crying, in much pain from experiencing napalm burns on her arms, back, and neck. Her name is **Kim Phuc Phan Thi**. I can't pronounce it and will refer to her as Kim, although that is not the correct way to pronounce it. The amount of suffering she has experienced in her life is beyond what we can even imagine. After the initial pain was the pain of all the treatments to try to heal her body and alleviate the pain. The burns left her skin dry and itchy. And she lost the ability to sweat, which means her body became like an oven in the Vietnam heat and humidity. At 54 years of age she is still experiencing treatment for those burns. She still experiences pain.

I know that many of you have experienced suffering in your lives. Suffering is multifaceted. It has many faces. Your suffering may be mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, or a combination of these.

Suffering for most of us is not the normal state of our lives. While there are babies born with deformities, most of us are born healthy. And healthy is the norm for most of our years. Because of this we take health for granted. We never question why we are healthy. We never question why we are not suffering. We may give thanks for our health, but we never stop and ask God why we are healthy instead of suffering.

We expect to be free of suffering. We think it is natural and normal. We may even think we deserve it. That is one reason we think something is wrong with the world when we do suffer in some way. Suffering leaves us puzzled. Suffering gets us asking questions about life. Suffering turns our attention to God.

Kim writes, "For years, I prayed to the gods of the Cao Dai (pronounced cow-die) for healing and peace. But as one prayer after another went unanswered, it became clear that either they were nonexistent or they did not care to lend a hand."

She goes on a bit later to write, "... the most agonizing pain I suffered during that season of life dwelled in my heart." She was a person alone. No one wanted to be her friend. No one was willing to be involved in her pain-filled life of hardship.

Suffering tests our theology. It is easy to say we believe in God when everything is going good in our lives. But when we experience suffering of some kind, we question our beliefs. Our beliefs do not usually include a good reason for suffering. So suffering challenges our beliefs about life, about God, about His love for us.

A few years ago I preached a series called **Foundations to Build Your Life On**. The point of that series was to ground you in the basic facts about life on earth. I presented to you the basic facts of Biblical theology. My goal was to help you deal with suffering when it occurs in your life. When you experience suffering, it is time to go back and review those basic theological truths that all our theology is built on. The answers we seek about suffering in life are built on these basic truths. **How we respond to our suffering depends on what we really believe about God and us and life.**

When we experience suffering in our lives, it drives us back to the core of our beliefs. This is what maintains our faith in those suffering experiences. The first of those foundational beliefs is that...

Foundation #1: God is real. The existence of God is the first foundation. This is revealed at the very beginning of the Bible.

Genesis 1:1 (NIV) In the beginning God...

Before anything of earth existed, God was. God existed. God is outside of the universe. This is the start of a biblical worldview. How we look at life is different from those who do not believe in God. Science is the same for believers and unbelievers. But how we look at science is different when we start with the reality of God.

Foundation #2: God is the creator of all life.

Genesis 1:1 (NIV) In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

God created me, and you, and the earth. God created the plants, water, and the air we breath. God created all life and all that life needs. We are not an accident. God created us intentionally. And God did so for a reason. God has a goal to which He is guiding all of human history. God has a purpose for us.

It is in God's purposes that our lives make sense. Even our suffering will make some sense. God has a reason for everything we experience. When God gives us health it is for a reason. When God lets us suffer, it is for a reason. And all of God's reasons are good.

Our normal healthy existence is a gift of God's grace. A job is a gift of God's grace. An education is a gift of God's grace. Family is a gift of God's grace. A good place to live is a gift of God's grace. Health is a gift of God's grace. We know our health and other blessings are gifts of grace because of foundation number three.

Foundation #3: We are all sinners.

Romans 3:23 (NIV) "...for all have sinned..."

Everyone on earth is a sinner. Sin does not deserve health. This is where our foundational beliefs really impact our suffering. Because I am a sinner I don't deserve whatever good I have in my life. I deserve a lot of suffering for my sin. The non-suffering life I have so enjoyed most of my life was a gift from God. It was not something I deserved or earned. It was an undeserved gift.

The suffering I experience is what I deserve for sin. **So if God chooses to let me experience some suffering, I have no right to complain.**

When you wake up in the morning without pain, do you ask why?

God, why do I feel good? Why do I have food for breakfast? Why do I have a nice place in which to live? God, why do I have these good things? I don't deserve them.

Instead we ask why we suffer pain, or poor relationships, or troubled finances. We ask such questions as if those things were undeserved.

So our prayers are backwards from the theology we say we believe. Our prayers are backwards from the foundational truths of a biblical worldview. We aren't thinking right and aren't praying right. We have not integrated the foundational truth of Romans 3:23 into our personal theology.

We assume, because we are good people, that we SHOULD be healthy. So when we suffer, THEN we ask, "Why?" But the truth is that we do not deserve any of the good things we enjoy. We have it backwards. Any health we have is a gift of God's mercy.

C.S. Lewis said, "The real problem is not why some pious, humble, believing people suffer, but why some do not." – C. S. Lewis

I deserve whatever bad I have in my life. I deserve whatever suffering God allows me to experience. We all do. As long as we reject that idea, we will fail to see suffering accomplish God's purposes for it.

Yes, suffering has a purpose in our lives. There are several reasons revealed in the Bible for why God allows us to suffer. We'll look at those beginning next week. But we have to start with the right foundational theological truths or those reasons won't make any sense to us.

Christians rely on spiritual truth as revealed in the Bible. Such truths include the existence of God, God as creator, the sin of mankind. Some other basic beliefs include the attributes of God. **God is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present, good, and loves us.**

God proved His love for us in sending Jesus to die for us. Jesus suffered. Jesus suffered tremendously. And he did so on our behalf. God always acts for our good. While the cross wasn't good for Jesus, it brought much good to us. We read of our blessings and agree with Paul when he writes...

Romans 8:28 (NIV) And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Kim's search for inner peace took her, in 1982, to Saigon's central library. She loaded her arms with religious books and started scanning through them for help. She had books on Baha'i, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Cao Dai. Included in the stack was a Christian New Testament. After an hour she had made her way through much of the gospels. In Cao Dai she had been taught that there were hundreds of names for God. In the New Testament she learned that Jesus claimed to be the only way. And then she read of his suffering which was evidence FOR his claim. The more she read the more she came to believe in the truth of what Jesus taught. She wondered why he would endure being mocked, tortured, and killed if he were not, in fact, God. Later that year she was finally convinced that Jesus was the savior of the world and she became one of His followers.

Timothy Keller in his book The Reason for God, points out that just because we can't think of a good reason for suffering, doesn't mean there isn't one. If God is all knowing,

He sees the world much differently than we do. He sees the big picture. He has a good goal to which He is moving all of human history. He is good and is working for our good. It is logical then to assume that He has a good reason for allowing us to suffer. Just because we can't think of what that good reason might be does not mean there isn't a good reason for it. The Bible gives us some reasons for our suffering and we will look at them over the next several Sundays.

But if we believe the foundational truths about God and us, then our prayers should reflect those truths even in the face of our suffering.

Change your prayers from "I don't deserve this" to...

"Use my suffering, God, for Your glory."

"Use my suffering to transform me."

"Use my suffering to draw people to Jesus."

"If I am to blame for my suffering, show me what I need to repent of."

(Luke 3:8 & 10)

Not all are willing to pay the price to end their own suffering, not if it means admitting their sin and repenting of it. They'd rather complain. Do not be one of them.

Admit your need for God.

If your suffering is physical, seek medical help. The lack of help may point you to one of the reasons for your suffering that we will look at in the coming weeks.

Kim continues to suffer today. But she is thankful for those bombs of napalm because her suffering led her to Jesus. Those are her words. You can read her story, and find out of her book in this month's issue of Christianity Today magazine.

Among the foundational truths of a biblical worldview is that we all are sinners in need of a savior. And Jesus is the one and only Savior available to us. If you are ready to admit your sin to God, receive Jesus as your savior and turn your life over to Him, you can be saved from the penalty of your sins.