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Why me?: The bedrock of suffering

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Why Me?: The Bedrock of Suffering

The world is unnerved but captivated by the wave of massive, indiscriminate destruction that befell Asia. In the protection of our society where pat answers are the drug, we meet face-to-face with the fragility of life, feel compassion, and return to business as usual. The reality is that we too are in the path of life's devastations.

It is suffering to even consider the tragedies that could befall us. Yet, suffering comes to all without prejudice... on the just and unjust.¹ When faced with the heartache of rejection, emptiness of loss, the bite of physical pain, the brokenness of regret, or the betrayal of violation, we reel in the wake. Pain and fear mingled with confusion breed a litany of questions that have no apparent answers and deathly silence from God only serves to tighten suffering's grip. And yet we continue to ask. Just as Job, we want that which is out of reach: both instant relief and that God explain Himself. Even if God provided answers, would we really accept them as justification for our suffering?

Our Internal Navigation: The Bedrock

The main window to one's internal system is the reaction to difficulty. Thus, suffering does not create our attitude, it reveals it. Usually we can absorb afflictions but when our internal world is rocked, the crucible of calamity shatters our beliefs about life. Three of these beliefs that must be assessed are *I deserve ease and comfort in life*, *the world must be predictable*, and *the world must be fair*.

I Deserve Ease and Comfort

Our nature compels us to seek pleasure, comfort, and ease. But life works against our desires. Consider the opening sentence of Scott Peck's book, *The Road Less Traveled*, "Life is difficult..."² Comedian Jerry Seinfeld observed that perhaps the road less traveled is less

traveled for a good reason. He was right. Our drive for pleasure seeks a smooth and trouble-free route.

There is nothing inherently wrong with creature comforts and ease. The problem is we demand them and when we lose comfort and ease, we assume God is not good. Even Job questioned God's goodness by accusing God of mistreating him.³

In others words, if I am uncomfortable and unhappy God is NOT good. C. S. Lewis wrote, *"If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both."*⁴ Corrie ten Boom, the famed survivor of Ravensbruck keenly understood God's goodness. She penned *"...God is good when He sends good weather. But God was also good when He allowed my sister Betsie to starve to death before my eyes in the German concentration camp."*⁵

As long as we assume that life must be comfortable, we will never come to accept trials and adversity as normal, even those considered undeserved.⁶ Rather than looking to God, we will rely on our own strategies to find comfort again. If unsuccessful, we will wallow in self-pity and misery.

The World Must Be Orderly and Predictable

Our nature assumes that non-physical realities are orderly and predictable, that misfortune is not haphazard, and that events are mostly positive in outcome. We know of misery in the world, but innately distinguish between the "world in general" and "our world." The way we live in our world conveys the sense that we have little value for the invisible world. It is the measure of our reality that occupies our thoughts. Treating problems as a matter of skill or choice, and shrinking problems to manageable size feels more comforting than considering the

deeper purposes of God. Thus, life is reduced to a series of steps, with cause and effect. The assumption is that we can directly control what happens to us through our own behavior.

Because effort, practice, or planning have an effect on outcomes that we can control, we believe that they can determine chance outcomes as well. Research indicates that people assume that they have more control of their lives than they actually have. Those who think they are captains of their own ship, live with an illusion of safety. We know that bad things happen; but in our gut we believe we are exempt. We think we can control life and that our strategies protect us. Even in the midst of adversity we tenaciously cling to this assumption because, if it is not true, then we too can experience random difficulties. Thus, living right is the strategy, and discipline and diligence the formula.

We seek to understand the distribution of good and bad and, in the service of order and predictability, impose seemingly natural consequences between people and what they experience. One study showed different endings of a woman's return to her home to two groups. The group that saw the woman arrive home without incident observed no risky behaviors, but the group that saw the woman attacked reported that she did not exercise caution. To protect the illusion that our world is predictable and thus controllable, we place blame to impose an illusion of control. The unpredictability of an event challenges that illusion, resulting in confusion, panic, and despair. Because a predictable world requires logical order, when we cannot reason out cause and effect suffering becomes random and unpredictable. In the midst of suffering we demand explanation and justification for our pain. Without these, we conclude that God cannot be trusted and feebly return to attempting to control. In our minds and hearts, God is trustworthy only to the extent that things go the way we expect them to go.

The World Must Be Fair

Our innate sense of fairness is marred by sin. We twist fairness into a formula in which people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. In our world, individual decency and goodness determines what happens to a person. Like our need for order and predictability, this too helps us minimize the role of randomness.

As adults, we know that our world is not fair and that we will be treated unfairly.⁷ Therefore, we don't expect fairness but to be treated differently; to receive treatment that we define as fair. Research found that people want mercy when they transgress, but desire retribution when wronged. Perceived unfair treatment makes us bristle with contempt for our offenders; even for God. Our tendency to doubt God's justice is not rational, but emotional.

Helping Counselor's Make Sense Out Of Nonsense

Our internal system cannot accommodate aberrations. In the face of aberration, the comfort and complacency provided by our internal guide is lost. The new puzzle piece does not fit into our system no matter how hard we push. Therefore, we must entirely modify our system to move forward.

In trauma's wake, people seek counseling to increase their sense of control. But as counselors, the problems brought to us have no clear answers. We face paradox, ambivalence, and anger. We must explore the polarity of the human heart, postpone quick answers, and make sure the complexity of the new reality is acknowledged. It is through the dialogue about the counselee's questions and pain that healing comes. We must resist being taken hostage by their cry for certainty. To value struggle, entertain maddening questions, and work with intolerable pain is difficult. Our own instinct may also move us toward safe subjects, to reach for instant

recipes, to stop the bleeding. We must learn to value struggle over prescription, questions over answers, anxiety over comfort, and desire over fulfillment.

Godly helping means being fully present with sufferers. In due time, we must gently lead them into the darkness of their internal world. Be patient as you invite them down the treacherous path of healing that takes them through the ugliness of the soul. Their overwhelming fear may paralyze them. The route to healing is less obvious than a formula or action plan. It is more strenuous and uncertain. Since suffering is applied theology, it will bring them face-to-face God's grace.

References

¹ Matthew 5:35

² M. Scott Peck (1985). *The road less traveled*. New York: Phoenix Press. (p. 15)

³ Job 16:12-14

⁴ C. S. Lewis (1967). *The problem of pain*. New York: Macmillan. (p. 26)

⁵ Corrie ten Boom (1982). *Clippings from my notebook*. Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publications. (p. 56)

⁶ See 1 Peter 4:12-13

⁷ See Ecclesiastes 8:14