

A Historical Perspective On The Church In Hard Times (Growing in Isolation Week 7)

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[0 : 0 0] Hey guys, my name is Brian Hart. I'm one of the pastors here. Welcome to our next week in the Growing in Isolation series. At this point in the shutdown, I think for a lot of folks, the sense of suffering and hardship is starting to get a little bit raw. I've heard stories of children who have broken down in tears, sobbing, seeing their classmates and their teacher on Zoom.

I have close friends of mine who are on the brink of financial catastrophe that they never even saw coming about a year ago. So for some of us, the shutdown is just a headache, but for a lot of us, the suffering is real and it's getting worse. And so what I want to do today is for those, especially for those of you who really feel like you are suffering, this is very difficult for you.

I want to help you step back from the rock face of your own suffering and think about how Christians have approached suffering over the last 2,000 years because Christians have not always emphasized the same things when it comes to suffering. And appreciating all the things that Christians have said over the years about suffering helps us with a more robust way of approaching our own. Today in our culture, suffering is often a reason to doubt God. You've probably even heard of people who've walked away from the faith because of their suffering or the suffering of someone they love. While that is understandable, there's a little bit of irony in it because the earliest Christians actually believed that pain and sorrow and tragedy were some of the main reasons for trusting in Christ, which is an interesting thing. In their day, the alternatives to Christianity had very unsatisfying answers to the problems of suffering. So Christians often came out of two different groups.

We see this in the New Testament. A lot of them came out of the Jewish culture and a lot of them came out of what could be called Greek culture. And both of those groups had things to say about suffering. The Jews, not all of them, but a lot of them would have had what we could call a moralistic approach to suffering in which suffering is taken to mean a kind of judgment from God on your life.

We see this in the book of Job. Job's friends believe that. Contemporaries of Jesus believed that when bad things happened, it was a sign of God's judgment. The Greeks were different. The Greek Stoics, they were philosophers who taught that you were supposed to detach yourself from your suffering.

[2 : 27] It's actually kind of an illusion and you need to just detach yourself from the things in life that would cause you to suffer in the first place. And it sounded really good when they wrote about it, but as you can imagine, it did not exactly help people in a practical way, you know, the everyday guy in the trenches of everyday life. Well, Christianity did something else. It gave an answer that was the combination of two seemingly opposite things in terms of how we can think about and approach our own suffering. So a Christian said, one, you have way more space for grief and sorrow than the Stoics will give you. The Stoics were saying, you know, stiff upper lip, you know, you need to just detach yourself from suffering. Christian said, no, you pour out your tears. You vent your frustration to the Lord. You have all the space you need for that. And at the same time, Christian said, you also have far more reason to hope in your suffering than the moralistic Jews will give you. Remember, the Jews often taught that suffering was a sign of judgment, maybe even a sign that God had rejected you.

Christian said, no, when you suffer, it's not a sign of rejection. It is often a way of identifying with God himself. Christ is the God who suffers. The resurrection of whom is a reminder that everyone's suffering is going to soon end. And so in the ancient world, this made quite a splash that you can do both these things. You can grieve and you can also press on with hope. A great example of what that looked like would have come from the church father Ambrose during the fourth century. His brother died and he wrote about his grief and he talked about how not all weeping proceeds from unbelief and from weakness. The Lord also wept. But that same guy also wrote these words. Ambrose said, let there be this difference between the servants of Christ and the worshipers of idols, that the latter weep for their friends whom they supposed to have perished forever, but from us, for whom death is the end, not of our nature, but of this life only. Since our nature itself is restored to a better state, let the advent of death wipe away all tears. And so death, even the loss of a loved one, it can do two things. It can cause you to weep and it can wipe away your tears. Because according to the gospel of Jesus, death, the enemy, has had its power reversed upon itself, which is why scripture says that death is dead. And so Christians believe that you've never been more fully alive than right after you die. So you can see how Christianity stole people's hearts thousands of years ago because it had so much more to say than the alternatives. Now over time, things changed. Over the next thousand years into the medieval period, people began to teach that the way that you endured suffering is part of how you earned favor with God. In fact, enduring suffering is part of how you earn your salvation. Martin Luther, though, came along and he and the other reformers said, no, we are saved by grace alone. It's all grace and grace sets you free from the pressure to perform. Because of grace, you can trust the fact that not only did Jesus have a resurrection, you're going to get a resurrection.

You can take that to the bank, which is great news when you're actually suffering. And so for Luther, suffering did a couple things. It was not a test you had to pass in so much as it was a way of being humbled. So when you suffer, you remember how much you need the Lord. But also he coined the phrase, the theology of the cross. It is the way into God's glory. It's the way of Christ. The pinnacle of Christ's ministry was suffering. And so we should expect it as well. If it happened to Jesus, we know it's going to happen to us. The way up is to first go down. And so an important point that Luther made is that enduring suffering is not the way to get right with God. He said it's actually the reverse.

Getting right with God, according to the good news of the gospel, that is the way that we endure suffering. Suffering is brutal, but it would be totally unbearable if we did not know that God is for us and that he loves us. Then again, as we move forward into history over the next several hundred years, again, things began to change. And after the enlightenment, a few specific things happened. First, people began to take a view of God in which he was the kind of distant and remote watchmaker. You know, the kind of God that creates the world, much like a watchmaker would create a watch. And then he just stands back and observes. And at the same time, people began to embrace reason over revelation, meaning we trusted less what God revealed to us and we trusted more what we were able to discover with our own reason. Now, those two things created real problems when it came to suffering. If God is standing at a distance watching all this happen, it raises the question, well, how can he be a good God? I mean, wouldn't a good God be close and help us out and, you know, keep bad things from happening to good people, so to speak. And because reason is so important to us in the day in which we live, that means that if we cannot understand the meaning of our suffering, if we can't answer the question of why, that makes God look even more monstrous because we have assumed that if we have not discovered the meaning to our suffering, then there isn't any and our suffering is meaningless. And so these are part of the reasons why so many people have lost their faith in the face of suffering. Well, again, Christianity offers something very helpful to those who are willing to listen. Christian says that God is not distant at all. He is still near to us in our suffering. In Acts, when Christ appeared to Saul, who is persecuting the church, he did not ask, Saul, why are you persecuting Christians? He asked Saul, why are you persecuting me? Every single time a Christian suffers, Christ is not distant and remote.

He is present and suffering with us. And our inability to answer the difficult questions of why can be a cause for disbelief, but they can also do the opposite. The unanswered questions of Christianity turn out to be more comforting than troubling the more you consider them because the mystery of suffering is at the heart of the gospel. How is it that the worst thing happened to the best person so that the best thing, which is salvation, could happen to the worst people?

[8 : 40] That is a mystery. And our inability to understand that is not a weakness of Christianity. It's one of the hallmarks of our faith. So if you are suffering, whether from loneliness or the loss of income, remember there is room to grieve and also to have hope. Endurance is important, but it is not so that God will love you. God loves you and so you can endure. And lastly, remember the question, why is not always the best question. In Christ, we don't get all our answers, but we always get a person who suffers with us and promises that one day it will end. I hope that helps you guys. God bless you. We'll see you next week.