

75. *Sister Suffering*



You don't walk away from tossing handful of dirt onto the coffin of a loved one, unchanged. Listening to a spouse, or child, pack their suitcase in anger and depart for the last time; strolling unemployed into the face of the peak hour rush of the gainfully employed; and closing the door of your doctor's consultancy room after a fearful diagnosis - are the type of events that rip open and expose our hearts, leaving us raw. It doesn't help when well meaning friends rush to slap a diagnostic scripture on our situation, to make themselves feel a bit removed from the victim's powerlessness. The injunction to "praise the Lord, anyway", like Paul did in the stocks,(Acts 16:25) feels more like denial that you are in the midst of something profound-this is no flesh wound that mere bravado can dismiss.

The book of Lamentations, one third of the psalms and many scriptures stand as testimony against the Disneyland prosperity theology which presents with its cheery face. Life is not a journey through an amusing theme park. Nor is God a dispensing machine delivering what we want, and when we want it, like a mechanical machine, rewarding us because we invest the right prayers and tithes.

There is death, tragedy, hurt, illness and experiences that are fearful and unfair on our life's journey. And these times can also be periods of spiritual dryness and God seems silent.

We do trust that when our personal world slips out of control, that God remains sovereignly in control. Major trauma and suffering doesn't destroy us,

but it does prune us back from our business as we withdraw, take stock and start to regenerate, incubated by a grace we might well not detect. We emerge from the season of Lamentations with a fresh orientation to God and others.

Our favourite dress, the grey hairs on our scalp, that annoying feature of a colleague's work practise, and our housework routines get scaled back and recalibrated. It is not that we get oriented to just the themes of some grand theology; we are awakened to the caring acts of others towards us, and appreciative of small things like the beauty and boldness of a weed pushing up through the concrete crack defiant of the tons of cement overlaid. We appreciate that we are indeed fragile, and temporal creature not destined to be on earth for long. We become more deliberate about what goes into our calendar especially if it takes us away from loved ones, we are emboldened to stand up to pastors/priests and say "no" to requests to do more in church activities. We have discovered that we can live without TV and the media, updates on our favourite sports team, the latest consumer products that we previously wanted. Indeed much of what absorbed our time before the suffering switched us on to alertness and reflection is relegated.

Tragedies and lamentations will come our way regardless of our efforts to raise up positive theology shields and expose the illusion that life is consistently just (so we don't deserve suffering on a major scale). When these seasons draw to a close we want to emerge applying the insights gained at a high price from *Sister Suffering* and be less narcissistic. We want to be rightly involved in serving our suffering world.

Canticle of Brother Sun and Sister Moon by St. Francis of Assisi

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
In the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
And fair and stormy, all weather's moods,
by which You cherish all that You have made.

Praised be You my [Lord](#) through Sister Water,
So useful, humble, precious and pure.

Praised be You, my [Lord](#) through Sister Death,
from whom no-one living can escape.

Blessed are they She finds doing Your Will.

My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long,
"Where is your God?" Ps 42:10

Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer Is 53:10

Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, Mt 16:21

Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" Lk 24:26

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, Phil 1:29

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 1 Pet 1:6

But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened." 1 Per 3:14

Those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. 1 Pet 4:19

Painting used by permission of Apple