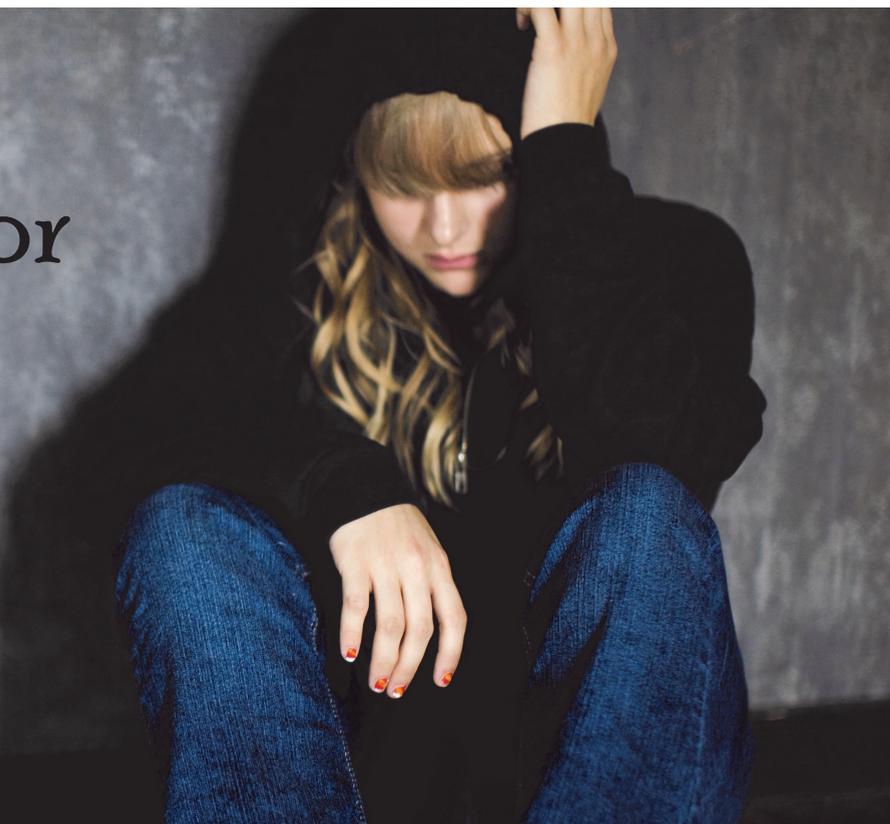


Preparing for Suffering

Bolstering our faith



IN THE LAST issue we started looking at the things which will waste our suffering. Number 1 on the list is a deficient trust in God. If our faith is weak, misplaced, or unfuelled we will struggle all the more when suffering hits.

So before moving on to the second ‘suffering waster’ I want to look at specific ways to bolster our faith which will prepare us for living the Christian life, and for when suffering strikes.

It should be fairly clear what the general principles are that will strengthen our faith, but let me make three specific applications;

Know your God

If one of the problems which exacerbate suffering is too much focus on life and not enough on God then we need to redress the balance.

What are you reading? If you aren’t suffering make sure you supplement your diet with long gazes at the cross, and at the greatness of God—camp out in the Passion narratives at least once a year, delve into Isaiah 40 & 53, Romans 8, Psalm 103, Ephesians 1 & 2, and many more of those great passages (even work at memorising one of them—far easier done before suffering hits). Another good place to explore is the book of Exodus. Watch God’s

suffering people, watch how God deals with them, and above all watch the wisdom and character of God.

If you are suffering, don’t be bound by your daily reading plan. Satan loves to beat us with that sort of regimen. Go and camp out in those passages which show you very clearly the majesty, the greatness, the tenderness, the love of your God. And stay there for a long time. Perhaps you feel that you can’t read much, the concentration simply isn’t there, so take a verse or simply a line, and savour it. Roll it around your mind to extract all the soul nourishing juices.

Read your Bible not simply to learn how to live, but also to learn about your God. Dale Ralph Davis’ commentaries are a great help in this.

Know God’s commitment to your good

Be convinced that God is committed to your good. He has already proved, at the Cross, that he will stop at nothing for your good. If he has taken you somewhere, it is definitely not because he has forgotten you, or has it in for you. Where he has you is the best of all possible options for you.

This can be hard to see amidst pain, but before God asks us to trust him that he is working our pain for

good, he takes the ultimate pain on himself and works it for good. He underwrites his commitment in the blood of his Son. God’s passionate loving commitment to you is not up for discussion. We need to be convinced of this.

That’s part of what Paul is saying in Romans 8:32—“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”

It’s easy to question what God is doing in the midst of it. But we need to be convinced that he always acts for our good.

God has brought this lesson home to me at different times over the past year—often in the passages I was preaching on. Last January as I lay flat on my back in the car as we headed from Letterkenny to Dublin, I wondered why for once I had my sermon finished early if, as I suspected, I wasn’t going to be preaching it for some time. It was on Exodus 2:11-24—dealing with Moses at the peak of his influence and physical prowess being taken out into the desert for 40 years to look after wayward wandering sheep. It didn’t make sense, humanly speaking, but God had a purpose. It was for the making of Moses and the good of the people—his 40 years as a shepherd

were perfect preparation for leading wayward wandering Israel around the desert looking for 40 years.

It dawned on me that I hadn't needed to get the sermon finished early for the people of Milford and Letterkenny, but for me. I needed to be reassured that when God acts counter to our way of thinking, it is because he has a greater purpose and he is shaping us for his service. I had finished with the following questions, which now seemed rather pertinent:

What hard things has God been doing in your life to prepare you to serve him?

Will we trust God's faithfulness when he takes us into the unknown?

Know that God pursues his glory for your good

One of our unspoken fears comes from knowing God does all things for his glory—and we fear that in the midst of his pursuit of glory we will get trampled on. We can fear his glory. We don't want him to pursue his glory at our expense. Behind this lies a lie—that God's glory and our good are two unconnected threads.

Not so. God has graciously and wonderfully intertwined the threads so that his pursuit of his glory is always for the good of his people, and never at the expense of his people. Once again God showed me this in our studies in Exodus:

In Exodus 14 God took the Israelites down the 'wrong' side of the Red Sea, so that they ended up trapped. God explains to them that, "I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen" (v17-18). It would seem at first glance that this expeditionary detour is simply for God to display his glory, never mind the fears of the people.

It is clear that the people were afraid, not just because of the circumstances but because they lacked faith in God's promise to take them to the Promised land. But Moses called them to trust and to be still: "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today."

But there was more to it. "The Egyptians you see today you will never see again." God had taken them that way so that they could see something they could not otherwise see, something that would help them on the rest of the journey. Never again would they have to look over their shoulder wondering if the Egyptians were coming. God took them that way to let them see his glory for their good.

If God has taken you down the 'wrong' side of something, it is so that you can see something you would not otherwise see, something that will help you in your journey towards the Promised Land. Be convinced that God's glory is intimately intertwined with your good. We need to ask ourselves, "Do I trust that God's glory is for my best? And if I do, am I willing to trust God to do what he is doing no matter how hard, rather than settle for anything less than his best?"

Trump your emotions with His truth

As we bolster our faith by getting to know our God better and trusting his goodness, that will act as steel reinforcing rods in the concrete of our faith. It will act as weed-killer, preventing the weeds of doubt and fear from taking root. But a little more is needed. We need to know how to fight our fears and emotions when they threaten to run riot.

We need to take the truth of what we do know and allow it to trump the uncertainty of what we don't know. Too often we look at God through the lens of our circumstances. And Satan gives us plenty of help. He is like a demented optician forever inserting the lens of circumstances into the frame and asking us what we think of God now—and we end up with a distorted view of God. Instead we need to look at our circumstances through the lens of God's character and his word. We need to trump our emotions with truth. We need to say to ourselves. "I may feel this way, but I will believe this truth."

Preaching on Exodus 13:17-22 brought this home for me. Too easily I could have skipped over it, but a

Some listening to get you started:

Dale Ralph Davis sermon "How Do We Go On from Here?" on Exodus 13:17-14:4

Dale Ralph Davis on Psalm 121 "God Is for Keeps", and Psalm 124 "Unless..."

Christopher Ash on Job (Winter At the Castle 2009), especially the first talk "Why is light given to him who is in misery?"

<http://www.woodlandpca.com/media/8-7-2005.wma>

<http://www.woodlandpca.com/media/11-12-2006AM.wma>

<http://www.woodlandpca.com/media/12-31-2006%20AM.wma>

<http://www.atthecastle.org.uk/tag/job/>

sermon by Dale Ralph Davis brought things in to focus:

When I feel I can't take any more, I need to remind myself that He does take account of my frailties. He does know my breaking point and will not push me beyond it (v17).

When I feel that life is all over the place and I don't know what God is doing, I need to remind myself that He has a good purpose amidst the mystery (v17-18).

When I feel that his promises are written in sand, I need to remind myself that He keeps his promises, no matter how long it takes (v19).

When I feel forsaken, I need to remind myself that this God goes with his people on the journey (v20-21).

Too often we dwell on how we feel, and reinforce how we feel. Instead we need to correct and control our feelings with the truth.

Next issue we'll move on to the second item that wastes our suffering, but for now, aim to read your Bible so that you will know your God so that your trust will not be found wanting when suffering strikes.



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