



Don't Waste Your Suffering Part III

Suffering and Idolatry: Looking too much at other things

PICTURE TWO avid sportsmen. Both Christians. Both sustain a career-threatening injury. One is sorry that his playing days are over, he'll miss the game, it will be some time before he will even watch it on TV. The other is devastated, can't see how God would allow this, and descends into a deep depression.

What makes the difference? Undoubtedly our psyches are different; some are phlegmatic, taking life as it comes, others fiery and passionate. Looking at our previous two articles, the issue could be: Do they trust God enough with their future?

But I believe there is another factor that can make a difference, intensifying the suffering.

Idolatry—it's not a pleasant concept. Bold, stark, ugly. And perhaps you think, "Surely not amongst Christians!" If deficient trust is not looking enough at God, then idolatry is the problem of looking too much to other things.

It was the great Old Testament problem for the people of God, rippling through from Eden, to Sinai, to the Promised Land, to the exile, and John is still warning his readers at the end of the New Testament, "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

It lies at the root of all our sins. What we worship controls our

joy and how we respond to life's fluctuations. We live in a world full of good things that we are allowed to want and to enjoy. But Satan is a subtle adversary and, since he can't 'unsave' us, he will seek to sidetrack us - even with good things.

We have a tendency to hang our contentment on Jesus plus something - be it sport, health, family, relationship, marriage, having children, work or _____ (fill in your own blank). We would never say they mean more to us than Jesus, but in daily life these things can begin to function as our saviour, happiness-giver, or bringer of hope.

Suffering has a tendency to reveal where our hope really lies. Test yourself - how do you react when something goes wrong, when plans are denied, when hopes are dashed? Disappointment is understandable, but sometimes we are more than disappointed; we are gutted, devastated to the point of doubt or anger.

Before we launch into the rest of the article, I need to say that there are situations where the pain of suffering is intense, you feel devastated, and that suffering doesn't need to be compounded by being accused of idolatry. Idolatry does exacerbate suffering, but it isn't always present.

But if, as time passes, the rawness of pain refuses to go, it may be

worth asking, "Where did I root my joy and delight?"

Let me outline some things that can function as idols and intensify our suffering. Like Charles Dickens, let me take you on a tour of the past, present and future and show you the ghosts that can haunt us.

Idols from the Past

If we only think of idols as things that we delight in or worship we will miss the point. Sometimes they are things that we hate, but we attribute too much power and control to them. Not even God is powerful enough to change them, at least to our mind.

Bill's life isn't great. It is filled with disappointment. Nothing ever turns out right for him, but then why would it? He had a wretched childhood: a violent, alcoholic father, an absent mother. If only he had had different parents then he would have turned out ok, so he thinks. Undoubtedly, life would have been different, but Bill focuses so much on the past, rather than on the God who can redeem his past and give him a hope and a future, that his past has become all-powerful in his mind - he is its victim, and nothing can change that. So he resents God, and he resents those whose past wasn't like his. Sue's mum was a planner. She had planned out Sue's life to a tee. Sue

would go to university. Sue would become a teacher. Sue would continue teaching after getting married and having children. After six years of teaching, Sue couldn't cope with living out her mum's dreams. Now 53, and a mother of four, a sense of failure dogs her days, coating everything with a bitter aftertaste. Even after her mum's death, she feels as if she's living for her approval. She knows she's doing what God has given her to do, but the voices from the past speak louder than God. Idols from the past - voices (opinions of a bully or a teacher), people, expectations—can haunt us and make the daily grind of life a far bitterer grind. They breed resentment, bitterness or a sense of imprisonment.

Idols from the present

Idols that inhabit our present are more obvious, but let me spell out how some of them operate:

Health – Does your contentment hang on Jesus plus good health, or Jesus plus recovery? What if you have to live with a debilitating illness or disability? Physical suffering will be exacerbated if we value our physical well-being more than serving Jesus in the circumstances in which he has placed us.

Job – Does your job define you? Or your ability to provide for your family? How will you see yourself if you can't get a job? If you lose your job, will you feel less of a person?

Relationships – Everybody has one,

Some Resources

Idols of the Heart – Elyse Fitzpatrick

Counterfeit Gods – Tim Keller

except you. Would it completely throw you if marriage wasn't part of God's plan for you? Are you so set on a relationship that it is robbing you of the ability to enjoy what God is doing now?

My plans/timetable – How are you when your plans for a day don't work out? Tetchy? Storm around letting everyone know that what you're doing is really important? It's a good indicator that my plans are more important to me than reacting in a godly way, and serving God with obedience in any given moment. My 'idol' ex-

acerbates the suffering of the moment. The same applies on a much bigger scale with plans for weeks, months, years, life.

Our reputation – We have to keep up appearances - clothes, gadgets, home, garden, car, etc. We get ourselves into a financial bind because our happiness isn't located in Jesus; it's located in stuff. And, much more subtly, we have a reputation to maintain in the church - we couldn't let anyone know about our struggle with pornography, depression, prescription drug addiction or our rebellious children. So we put on a mask because we worship at the altar of other people's opinion, even in the Society of Recognised Sinners (aka the church), and we suffer alone, seeking no help until it's too late.

Idols in our present tend to breed frustration, impatience, despair, low esteem, and a host of other problems, all of which intensify our suffering.

Idols from the future

Idols from the future reach back into our present and breed worry. Here are two examples:

Finances – We may not splash our money around, but we may feel pretty secure, not because our trust in God is great, but because our bank balance is healthy and our pension fund well managed. Has the recent financial crisis overwhelmed you with worry—it may be an indicator that something other than God had your confidence.

Family – How will my family turn out? If we have made an idol of our family or their education this will weigh heavily on our shoulders. We will want to fix everything, control everything. We will fail to let God be God, entrusting our children and their welfare into his hands.

Smashing your idols

It is vital that we live our Christian lives constantly tuned into our wandering affections - where are they going now, what am I holding on too tightly to, what is sneaking into God's place in my hopes, fears or worries, who or what defines how I see myself?

How then do we fight?

1) Delight in all that Christ has done

for you

We need to train ourselves to see how Christ has purchased all that we need for the past, present and future: Past – Christ has purchased for you the loving affection of a Sovereign Father who will use all the hard events for good, and whose opinion of you is to be heard over all other voices.

Present – Christ has purchased for you all that you need for life and godliness. His plan and timetable are minutely worked out for your best.

Future – Christ has purchased for you the loving care of an omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent Father who owns the cattle on a thousand hills and cares more for you and yours than you ever could.

Do you believe this? We need to grow in delight of Christ and all that he has purchased for us. Such focused delight will guard our affections from wandering.

2) See the ugliness of idols

Since we tend to make idols out of nice things, we need to see the ugly side of what is happening.

Our idols from the past and future in particular maim God, chopping off his powerful arms, tearing out his loving heart, silencing his tender words. But worse, in all, we stand at the foot of the cross and look the Father in the eye and say, "It wasn't enough for you to crucify your Son; you should have done this for me too. You should have given me Jesus plus _____." That's what idols drive us to. And it's ugly.

3) Hold all good things loosely

It's good to hope, to aspire, to want to recover from illness, to be upset when jobs are lost, to grieve when a loved one dies. But we must remember to hold everything, apart from Christ, in an open hand - trusting that our heavenly Father will only take out and put in what is for our good. Enjoy by all means, but trust his timing, plans and purpose. Hold Christ tightly in one hand, and all else loosely in the other.



Rev. Mark Loughridge
New Life Fellowship,
Letterkenny and
Milford RPC
