

# where is God when it hurts?

## Hugh James reflects on a personal journey of suffering

My justification for daring to write on this subject is that, having been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) 13 years ago, I have some experience of what it's like to be on both sides of the fence. For young doctors, it is usually only in our patients that we confront suffering. When I was diagnosed with MS at 38, I was the odd one out. Now, two of my circle of friends have developed major chronic illnesses.

Many Christians facing suffering tend to react like the author Joni Eareckson who became quadriplegic in a diving accident. She recalls 'A part of the quiet rage I experienced was anger against God. Inwardly and very quietly I ranted and raved at him in my spirit. Now I think it is better to get angry at God than to walk away from him. It is better honestly to confront our real feelings and let him know this is how we feel . . . Far better than pasting on a toothpaste smile and going around . . . pretending you are not hurting.'<sup>1</sup>

I can understand her feelings. I respect her for recording them. I can only say that I was spared them, as my experience was rather different. As a medical student I obviously met suffering. I did so again working as a doctor in a poverty-stricken rural hospital in Burundi. Even though we were present during a genocide where 1-200,000 people were killed, somehow the 'problem of suffering' didn't become a personal issue for me.

Later the problem did become an issue for me. On my return to England I was senior registrar at the Brook Hospital in South London and was deeply involved in running the Intensive Care Unit. It was my job to console the relatives. It fell to me to tell parents that their 10-year-old daughter was brain dead or that their teenage son was unlikely to survive. I wept with them. I put my arm around them. But a question troubled me: as a Christian should I not be able to say something? I found I had nothing to say, and that spurred me to pray and study my faith. Here are some of my thoughts and conclusions.

## The suffering God

The complaint against God is often 'How could God do this?' This suggests a God who sits on high, throwing suffering at an

innocent human race. Another common question is 'Why him?' The victim was such a nice person. Is God unjust? As Christians our understanding of God the Father is informed by what we know of Christ his Son. When Philip asked 'show us the Father', Jesus' answer was that 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father'.<sup>2</sup> So if we want to know God's character, we must look at Jesus.

When we study Jesus we find someone who suffered. The linking of Jesus and suffering occurs over and over. It is predicted by the prophet Isaiah: 'He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering'.<sup>3</sup> Even the Christmas tinsel does not mask the suffering of the incarnation - Christ's poverty, homelessness, persecution and refugee status.

In 1946 the World Health Organisation defined health as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'. It could be paraphrased: 'the absence of suffering'. By this definition, Jesus was not enjoying health. He was sharing human suffering. But he came not only to share our sufferings, he came to save us.

'To save' has many meanings. It concerns the whole person. Ultimately it means being saved for eternity. But nearly a third of the references to salvation in the New Testament concern being set free from specific ills and the sufferings of life, ie imprisonment, disease, or demon possession. Throughout the New Testament Christ's eyes are on his principal goal, the cross. He said 'The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life'.<sup>4</sup>

Have you ever studied a crucifix? It reminds us of the physical contortions of Christ's body on the cross: the wounds, the nails, the lash wounds, the blood, the sweat, the fatigue; in sum, his sufferings.

This is not a distant God throwing suffering at us. This is God suffering with us, here on earth. This is God suffering for us. I do not understand why there is no way to be reunited with God the Father other than through Christ's death. But I am certain that if there had been, Christ would have taken it.

## The suffering Church

So, as I looked for an answer, I found that suffering is at the centre of our faith. I found, too, that suffering is integral to the experience of the church. As St Paul observed 'We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance'.<sup>5</sup> The early Christians experienced a whole catalogue of suffering: the martyrdom of Stephen and James heralded decades of imprisonment, torture and death for thousands of believers. Suffering took various forms. St Paul was shipwrecked. The church suffered poverty and famine. Suffering is a hallmark of the church in many parts of the world today.

I found that suffering is inherent in this fallen world. Thus St Paul writes 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time'.<sup>6</sup> So I came to the conclusion that suffering is not an aberrance. It is integral to Christianity. God does not inflict suffering on us. He shares it with us. So as part of a suffering world, it is inevitable that we will suffer with it. Indeed, Christians are called to do so. Anything else would produce 'Rice Christians'.

All these realisations brought me peace. God does care. God is not capricious. He is a suffering God. But even that did not give me a pat answer for parents in anguish. All I could do was to continue to put my arm around their shoulders and cry with them.

## My daughter's accident

Three years later, after taking up my consultant's post, my daughter was severely injured. One morning I routinely dropped her off at school. On her way home an out-of-control car mounted the pavement and mowed her down.

Late that night I found myself returning home, leaving her in the Intensive Care Unit. She was gravely injured, with brain damage, on a ventilator. We did not know whether she would live or die. Much of those days is a distant blur, but I remember the journey home. Our parents had joined us. 'I'll drive' said my father. 'I don't think you're up to it.' He was probably right, but it was I who was alert enough to scream 'Dad, the lights are red!'

I remember another conversation on that journey. I turned to my father and said 'Dad, do you know, I'm not asking "Why me?"' All the theoretical deliberations begun at the Brook Hospital had become a reality when our family was involved.

## My own illness

Just three years later it was I myself who was sick, having been diagnosed with MS. And yet I found that this understanding of suffering still held true. I still do not find myself asking 'Why does God do it?' or 'Why me?' Why not me? If my Lord suffered, why should not I? Why should I be exempt from the sufferings of our world?

If we are asking 'Where is God when it hurts?', then one of the answers will be: 'In his people, in his church, bringing help and encouragement'. St James reminds us 'Religion that God our

father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and keep oneself from being polluted by the world'.<sup>7</sup> Jesus, likewise, is emphatic. To care for those who are thirsty, hungry, sick, or in prison means no less than that 'you did it for me'.<sup>8</sup>

## Reactions of other Christians

Sadly, Christians today are often as hopeless in helping someone who is facing suffering as were Job's three friends 4,000 years ago. When he heard of my diagnosis, a Baptist pastor whom our family had known for many years came up to me and said 'Hugh, are you sure you have no unconfessed sin?' I said 'No', but in truth I should have said 'Probably, what about you?' Which of us keeps perfect accounts with God?

Another response to me was 'You just need faith'. This advice was usually accompanied by a tape from the person's favourite preacher. After quoting Jesus' promises for those who pray in faith they concluded 'You pray, you believe, you will be healed'. How do we square Bible verses about the power of prayer to remove a mountain<sup>9</sup> with Jesus' own prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, 'Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me'?<sup>10</sup> Or St Paul's prayer for removal of his thorn in the flesh?<sup>11</sup> Unlike the claims of these preachers, God's answer to Jesus was 'No!' It was 'No!' to St Paul, too. It may be 'No!' for us, too.

A lady came up to Rabbi Lionel Blue. 'O Rabbi' she said, 'I do like the way you Jews call a spade a spade!' 'Not at all Madam,' said the Rabbi. 'We Jews call a spade a bulldozer!' Jesus was a Jew. Could it be that when he spoke of faith moving mountains he was using dramatic exaggeration to emphasise the importance of faith and prayer? Are we Westerners taking as literal and universal what was never meant to be so? If we can't accept that, are we committing the double whammy, implying that the one who is suffering is at fault because they lack faith?

Some people have told me 'You are healed but you just do not recognise it'. I find that utterly meaningless. Others have said 'Your healing is in heaven'. So what? In heaven we will all be freed of physical limitations, even the infirmities of old age.

Another reaction I met was disappointment. When my diagnosis was known many people prayed for me. I'm grateful. Our church had known a number of answers to prayer. But as it became clear that God was not healing me, some were disappointed. I felt a sense of isolation as some individuals seemed to avoid me. There was a sense of embarrassment. Even our home group folded as several people confessed they felt unable to mention their own needs when obviously I had a greater need. That destroyed any possibility of pastoral care.

Healing has become a prime subject, even a fashion, in churches today. Many modern hymns echo the idea that Christ died for our sickness. It is uncomfortable to be told this repeatedly, especially when it is evident that Christ is not healing you of your own sickness. I think the more extreme proponents overstate the 'healing' connotation of salvation at the expense of other dimensions.

When I was first diagnosed I frequently prayed to be healed, both in my private prayers and at prayer for healing in church. But it always left me restless. I wanted to be what I was not. Finally I prayed: 'Lord, I am asking for healing this last time. If you say "No!" I will accept that as your will for me and stop praying for healing.'

God did not heal me, and, with a few special exceptions, I have not prayed for healing again. A little while later I discussed this with my vicar. He pointed out that in the cases of Jesus in the Garden and St Paul's prayer about the thorn in the flesh, both prayed three times, then stopped. As Ecclesiastes 3: 6 says, there is 'a time to search and a time to give up'.

*Footprints* by Margaret Fishback Powers is a poem that has inspired millions. The writer tells how walking through the sands of life left a double track of footprints because God was beside her every step. However, in times of trouble, there was only a single set of footprints. When she questions God, he replies 'That was where I carried you'. At the blackest times I did not feel close to God. I found prayer and Bible study difficult. But I was grateful and drew strength when others would join with me and pray for me. And in retrospect I can see how the Lord has carried me.

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## References

- 1 Eareckson J. *Suffering: a personal experience*. Dict-D1107. Lion Electronic Library CD ROM. 1996
- 2 John 14: 9
- 3 Isaiah 53: 3
- 4 Luke 9: 22
- 5 Romans 5: 3
- 6 Romans 8: 22
- 7 James 1: 27
- 8 Matthew 25: 40
- 9 Matthew 21: 21
- 10 Matthew 26: 39
- 11 2 Corinthians 12: 7-9

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# People with disabilities: four common mistakes

## 1. Does he take sugar?

You may think this attitude has disappeared. It has not. Vivien, my wife, and I met an old acquaintance. He turned to her and asked, 'Can he shake hands?' Another time we entered a strange vicarage drawing room. 'Would your husband like an upright chair?', the vicar's wife asked Vivien. This is people's reaction to me and I look fairly normal above the waist, can talk, reason, see and listen normally. What must it be like for those of greater disability?

## 2. I know what he needs.

It's hard to reject well-meaning help. Yet those who offer it are often getting in the way. A prime example is people who grab my elbows to support me. Fine, but if your legs don't work, how can you lever forward if your arms are firmly fixed? I well remember tripping over at a wedding reception and being pinioned, helpless, by a consultant neurologist from Queen Square. He should have known better.

## 3. Inaccessible buildings.

Another gripe is with institutions who proudly proclaim 'Facilities for the Disabled'. Most often this means a ramp at the back door 100 yards away. So often the 'disabled' just means 'wheelchair users', but most people with mobility problems are not necessarily in wheelchairs. What I and many elderly people need is a handrail at the front steps, or on any other steps. How accessible, for example, is your church?

## 4. People who get in the way.

They hold open a door but produce an aperture too small for someone with a stick and a wide gait. Or they open the door just when I've put my weight on it. I risk falling in a heap at their feet.

*Never forget. The humble 'How can I help?' is always much more welcome.*

RHJ