



Learning from our SUFFERING

key points

Abbreviating a Bible reading given at the 2011 CMF National Graduates' Conference the author explores the human condition since the Fall likening life to a temporary reprieve before justice is finally done.

We should consider suffering to be a tool God can use to accomplish his purposes in the lives of his people rather than something which is to be avoided at all cost.

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ should remind us of the permanent pardon he has secured for all who put their faith in him.

When I gave up working as a consultant surgeon to be pastor of a church, my family members were appalled: 'What a waste!' they said, 'Think of all the lives you were saving as a surgeon!' But I had to tell them that I never saved a single life. All our patients die eventually. All I was trying to do was postpone death for a little while; to give a brief reprieve from the inevitable end for all human beings.

In the beginning God said to Adam: 'You must not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil for when you eat of it you will surely die.'¹ Of course they *did* eat, but in God's mercy their death was delayed. The same is true for us: we're disobedient sinners waiting for God's judgement on the last day of history and in the meantime God has reprieved us.

Struggling with suffering

Chapters 38 & 39 of Isaiah record a reprieve for King Hezekiah and for the nation of Israel. When Hezekiah falls ill God commands: 'Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.'² Hezekiah is absolutely gutted: 'Hezekiah turned his face to the wall... and wept bitterly'.³ 'Remember, LORD, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes'.⁴ How could you do this to me God? I don't deserve this.

God answers with a reprieve for the king: 'I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add 15 years to your life'⁵ and God gives him a sign: 'I will

make the shadow cast by the sun go back the ten steps it has gone down on the stairway of Ahaz.'⁶ This sign is all about God's control over time. The stairway of Ahaz in Jerusalem acted as a sundial: you could tell the time by how far the shadow had got. And when the shadow retreated, that meant God had turned back time. It's a picture of what God is doing for Hezekiah, putting the clock back 15 years for him.

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Verses 10-14 tell us how Hezekiah felt when he was told he was going to die and we recognise in his response the stages that many people go through when they're struggling to come to terms with a terminal disease. Firstly there's shock: 'Must I go through the gates of death?'⁷ Then anger: 'How could God do this to me?' 'My life is just like a shepherd's tent being pulled down; like a cloth stripped off the loom.'⁸ He accuses God: '*You* have made an end of me.' Then there's grief: 'I cried like a swift or thrush, I moaned like a mourning dove.' And finally a cry for help: 'Lord, come to my aid!'⁹

Hezekiah is mourning over his life cut short. Being king suddenly counts for very little when you're facing death. Illness is a great leveller: once you're in a hospital gown, having an anaesthetic, or having an enema, you're pretensions quickly disappear.

How sad that many people come face to face with death and never see things in a right perspective. I can think of patients in a hospital ward in the last days of their lives - and what were they doing? Reading their Bibles? Thinking about the life to come? Not most of them: they were reading *Hello* magazine, or following their stocks and shares, or watching soaps on the ward television. Right up to the very end they were still playing with their toys in life's kindergarten.

In vv.15-20 we find Hezekiah praising God for prolonging his life, and here's the insight he gained: 'Surely it was for my *benefit* that I suffered such anguish.'¹⁰

God didn't just strike Hezekiah down arbitrarily. No God has purposes in this all along. Isn't that often our experience? We go through an illness or bereavement, or struggle with some clinical disaster in our practice - and it's difficult to understand at the time. But later we look back and see what God was doing, and say with Paul '*In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*'¹¹

As doctors, our job is to fight disease, delay death and bring comfort. But we mustn't lose sight of the fact that God uses illnesses and has purposes in suffering. We mustn't forget that there are more important things than bodily health. In the Western world we tend to assume that suffering is always bad and something to be avoided at all costs. But people in some other cultures take a different view. What has Hezekiah learned? 'In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction.' How? 'You put all my sins behind your back.' What Hezekiah realised was that God was overlooking his sins and delaying the judgment of death at least for a time.

Relief and reprieve

But it's only a reprieve; just a stay of execution. The king of Babylon sends letters and a gift to Hezekiah.¹² Well how flattering! Hezekiah gives the ambassadors a tour and shows them all the riches of his kingdom¹³ but receiving gifts from the Babylonians was equivalent to entering into an alliance with them and trusting in Babylon rather than exclusively in God.

Isaiah is disturbed¹⁴ and God shows him that the outcome will be defeat by Babylon and exile.¹⁵ Hezekiah's response is shocking: 'The word of the LORD you have spoken is good,' Why good? 'For he thought, "there will be peace and security in my lifetime."¹⁶ No concern for the future of God's people; no concern for the glory of God's name; just self-interest.

Well Hezekiah got what he wanted: 'peace and security in his lifetime'. But the reprieve for God's people was temporary and God's judgment in the

form of the Babylonians was on its way. Death is coming for Hezekiah and exile is coming for the people of Israel, because God is just and punishes all sin and rebellion... and that involves all of us.

So, thirdly, we see a reprieve for the whole world. Back in Eden, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they were thrown out of Eden under a death sentence. But Adam lived 930 years more with the death sentence hanging over him. Adam and Eve finally died, and so has every man and woman since then. We are all under a death sentence and we're all reprieved for this life, as we wait for Jesus to return as judge.

Permanent pardon

700 years after Hezekiah, Jesus came into this world. Hezekiah represented all God's people in his day as their King and Jesus represents all God's people everywhere as our King. But despite the fact that Jesus was the only human being who never sinned, there was no reprieve for Jesus.

For all who belong to Jesus the final judgment arrived 2,000 years ago. All the sins of all God's people everywhere were heaped up together at Calvary on that one day, and blamed on that one man, and there dealt with once and for all. Because of Jesus' suffering we know our sufferings will one day come to an end. Thank God there was no reprieve for Jesus! Jesus has achieved for us a place in glory where illness and suffering and old age will have passed away and we shall have resurrection bodies.

A minister who holds services once a month for disabled people told me about one particular Sunday when they were singing the song 'There is a Redeemer'¹⁷ and he saw a girl in a wheelchair beaming from ear to ear as she sang, with tears pouring down her cheeks. Afterwards he went and asked her why she was so moved and she answered: 'It's the last verse: 'When I *stand* in glory.' I'm not going to be in a wheelchair in heaven!'

That's what Jesus has achieved for us. When Jesus died he gained for us not just a reprieve, but a permanent pardon. We're going to die but we have eternal life.

Now when we struggle with suffering we need to learn to believe that God has purposes even when we can't see what they are - just as God was working in Hezekiah's life and his illness. That's what gives us hope.

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All of Hugh's conference talks are now available on the cmf website at www.cmf.org.uk/media



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references

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