

When You Are Afflicted, Christ Is Your Comfort

You may remember the bracelets that many Christians used to wear, which read WWJD: ‘What would Jesus do?’ It’s a good question. Actually, it’s not a bad way to guide our decision-making. The world would be better if Christians showed Jesus’ love and care in more of our interactions. And it would make a big difference if we reflected on that question before spouting off to our neighbours or unloading on our spouse, to cite just two common situations. WWJD, indeed.

Yet the question “What would Jesus do?” also oversimplifies the biblical record about Jesus’ actions. Jesus responded differently in different situations. He cracked the whip at the money changers in the temple (John 2:15), yet He rebuked Peter for his violence in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:52). Jesus praised the woman who extravagantly poured ointment over His head in Bethany (Matthew 26:6-13), yet He also commended the poor widow for her paltry offering (Luke 21:1-4). Jesus saw into the human heart in a way that we cannot, so it’s hard for us to figure out what He would do in every situation. But one WWJD always applies.

What would Jesus do? He would suffer. When you suffer as a Christian, you can know for certain that you’re doing what Jesus would. It’s what Jesus actually did! He didn’t seek suffering, like some cosmic masochist; rather, He suffered because He wanted us. He came to seek and save the lost, laying down His life as the ransom to free all humankind from bondage to sin, death, and hell.

His seeking and saving cost Him dearly. Roman crucifixion was anything but tidy. This deliberately barbarous practice was implemented to keep Rome’s captive people in submission. No Roman citizen could lawfully be put to death so cruelly. As in the case of Jesus, crucifixion usually involved being stripped and then mercilessly whipped before being nailed up to die a lingering, torturous death in naked, public shame. After days of starvation and exposure, most victims eventually died of asphyxiation. They could no longer raise themselves against the nails tearing at their flesh to gulp sufficient air to breathe.

It was an awful death for Jesus to die, yet all the blood and the gore of the cross was only the tip of the iceberg.

With His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, Jesus faced God’s wrath against us all. He was the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. At the cross, the atoning sacrifice was made; in His own body, Jesus carried the weight of all of humanity’s sins. The penalty for our sin was borne by Him. The ransom price was paid in full; the scales of God’s divine justice were balanced when Jesus died. So His last word from the cross was a triumphant cry: “*It is finished*” (John 19:30).

Does it sound strange that Jesus ended all that agonising misery of body and soul on such a high note? His whole life and mission was to fulfil the Father’s will. Jesus knew right from the start that He was on a mission to redeem a lost and condemned world, so He steadfastly set out to accomplish what He had been sent to do. He knew full well the price He would pay.

The night before He died, Jesus pleaded with His Father to find another way to complete the mission, if possible. Yet in the end, Jesus humbly prayed: “*Not My will, but Yours, be done*” (Luke 22:42). And so the Father’s will led first to the cross, through pain and death, to victorious resurrection joy.

No wonder, then, that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews frames Christian suffering with joy. “*Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the Founder and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God*” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Having finished His race in triumph, Jesus achieved the goal of his entire life and ministry - to pay the penalty for our sin and to ransom humanity from the clutches of sin, death, and hell.

We, too, can find joy in suffering - it is wrapped in the suffering of Jesus.

Your suffering will find meaning in Christ’s suffering, whether you hurt physically or emotionally. Of course, your affliction doesn’t pay for anyone’s sins, much less your own. That’s already over and done: “*For our sake [God] made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Your private pain finds meaning in the collective experience of all of Christ’s beloved. In writing about the suffering he encountered in his ministry, Paul saw affliction as the norm for all Christians. He saw his personal problems as mysteriously linked with the whole church - and the afflictions of Jesus: “*Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of His body, that is, the church*” (Colossians 1:24).

That's the secret to maintaining an even keel in storm-tossed situations and to finding persistent hope in the midst of your suffering: seeing your affliction as your personal link to Jesus. Because He is "*a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*" (Isaiah 53:3), you can be sure you are not alone in your suffering. Jesus is there with you. Because He bore your misery ahead of you and experienced it in a human body just like yours, your pain is sanctified in His. Emotional or physical distress can be endured not because you have sufficient grit and determination to push through it on your own but because He is alongside you. You have no virtual Saviour, but one with flesh, bone, and nerve endings like yours. He knows what He's saying when He invites you to come to Him with your worries and burdens: "*Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I shall give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light*" (Matthew 11:28-30).

You can fill in the blanks with your own afflictions. Life is never easy; frequently, it's very hard. Occasionally, it seems unbearable. Would you sometimes like to question Jesus about His so-called "easy" yoke and "light" burden?

You are not alone in your suffering. Jesus goes with you. In drawing close to Him, you will find comfort in your affliction because Jesus has walked your path ahead of you. "*For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too*" (2 Corinthians 1:5).

But remember, comfort isn't necessarily comfortable. Finding comfort doesn't always mean we are released from suffering. Instead, it means we are not alone in our personal misery or pain; we have company when we hurt. That's what a "comforter" is in the New Testament: someone called alongside us to sustain us in calamity. As Christians, the best we can give each other in times of affliction is what we ourselves have received - comfort from the comforter in chief: Christ Jesus our Lord.