

When You Are Weak, Christ Is Your Strength

Difficult days can sneak up on you. Everything is going well, but suddenly you find yourself in the pits. Those stormy stretches sometimes linger for quite a while - often, in my experience, the storms follow each other in rapid sequence. Likely, you know how that feels: hardships and uncertainties, losses and calamities keep coming.

You begin to wonder if you've been targeted for failure. Distressing times present a problem for the faithful Christian, who knows that our lives aren't random chaos. This is our Father's world, after all. Our loving God made the universe and everything in it. He hasn't gone on an extended holiday, leaving us on our own. As Jesus taught, nothing happens by blind chance: not even a sparrow falling from its nest escapes the Father's notice (Matthew 10:29).

Great minds in philosophy and theology have wrestled with this issue for millennia: If God is good, why is there evil? Logically we may conclude that either God is not good or that He's powerless to do anything about evil.

That's where logic would lead us astray. The cosmic riddle of evil cannot be solved using human reason and our unaided senses. Rather, as we undergo the reality of human calamity and pain, we need to be guided by the Holy Spirit through His Word: ultimately, you don't solve suffering - you endure it.

Suffering is natural for the Christian; it's sure to come your way. However, you needn't suffer all alone.

Suffering in itself is a bad thing; let's remember that. Christians are not masochists, looking for suffering wherever they can find it to impress God or others somehow. We Christians should take an unvarnished approach to reality. We shouldn't deemphasise pain or dilute suffering. We ought never to call evil good any more than we would call good evil.

So there's nothing wrong with avoiding suffering and trying to relieve pain. We should commend health professionals who facilitate healing for physically or mentally suffering people. In their darkest days, suffering people need skilled physicians of mind and body to obtain whatever measure of relief they can find.

If you're stuck in a tight spot, please do reach out for healing help. And while you're at it, look for a spiritual physician, too. A caring pastor's attentive ears and heart can soothe your aching soul in times of calamity. God has healing gifts for all His saints in His sure Word and holy sacraments - seek out such care.

And please, for God's sake, remember this: if you're imperilled emotionally or strung out spiritually, don't conclude that your faith is wrong. If you're a pastor or companion to a suffering soul, never belittle their pain or give the impression that their situation isn't bad. Your calling in times of calamity is not to paint smiley faces on human misery. Don't discount suffering and pain of any kind. You can't wave a wand and make ugliness magically disappear. So let's call a spade a spade: Misery upsets. Fear paralyses. Sickness wearies. Pain hurts. And the most searing pain of all, the final indignation: death stings.

The mystery: God hides Himself in the midst of sorrow and distress. Just ask Jeremiah, God's prophet to Judah. If you've read Jeremiah's prophecy, you'll know why he's often called "the weeping prophet." It was his misfortune to serve as God's spokesman through some of the most turbulent times in the history of his people. Jeremiah's earnest appeal to turn from their habitual idolatry and adultery and return to the God of their salvation repeatedly fell on deaf ears. Ultimately, Judah was sent into captivity in Babylon because of their hardened hearts and open rebellion.

The book of Lamentations, which reflects Judah's calamitous experience in Babylon, is usually attributed to Jeremiah. Though often overlooked, it offers a rich balm for suffering souls. It's a literary work of art, an elaborate poetic expression of lament-filing a complaint with God. The five chapters of this poignant lament reach their epitome squarely in the middle of the book, in chapter three: human calamity eloquently summed up in sixty-six exquisite verses.

The prophet pulls no punches and minces no words as he paints human calamity. As far as suffering people can tell, God alternately seems like a tormentor, a jailer, a hunter, a wild bear, or a ravenous lion looking for

prey to devour. Meanwhile, sufferers subsist on bitterness and wormwood, taunted continually by insults and ridicule, treated like scum and garbage. The brutal honesty of Lamentations 3 is not for the faint of heart. Have a read for yourselves.

If you've got the stomach to digest the whole cumulative deluge of human affliction encapsulated in these sixty-six raw verses, you will not only hear overtones of Judah's captivity and the voice of the weeping prophet Jeremiah but also echoes of the cry of dereliction from the cross of Calvary, where Jesus - the man of sorrows - died a tortured death, bearing our sin and shame in His own body.

At the very heart of this rushing torrent of pain stand the following key, visceral lines, powerfully evoking God's tender care for his wounded people: *"Though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men"* (Lamentations 3:32-33).

That's the awe-filled secret concealed within affliction: God is right there in the middle of it.

Ever since Eden, God has disguised Himself to get closer to us mortal beings. He hides His glory in shame, power in weakness, riches in poverty, and majesty in lowliness. We can see this most clearly in the incarnation of God's eternal Son in human flesh. Christ's divinity is wrapped in humanity, His life enclosed within His death. It sounds weird, but that's God for you: He deliberately wraps His faithfulness around those of us who are in misery. As Paul put it: *"God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are"* (1 Corinthians 1:27-28).

As much as you and I would like to escape suffering, dark days will come to us sooner or later. When those days arrive, it's essential that we do not yield to the inevitable panic. We can find grace and gratitude in times of calamity when we see that Christ Himself is the Helper rushing in. We were lost and without hope; He rushed from heaven to earth, all the way into our frail flesh, to intervene and save us. He rushed into death itself and then further down - even into the death of the cross. But by that death, He conquered death and vanquished hell.

As a result, the darkest valleys of your life can also hold hope. Since He Himself was wrapped in lowliness and degradation in His suffering, He is able to comfort you. He knows your suffering intimately well. After all, *"we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need"* (Hebrews 4:15-16).

In your sorrow and distress you have a Helper who's been there ahead of you. Jesus embraced your pain and misery and sanctified it at the cross by the touch of His sacred body, given for you. Whenever trauma comes your way, Jesus rushes to your side to help with His comforting Word. He will never leave you forsaken in your suffering. Be consoled by His sure promise: *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"* (John 11:25-26).

Martha answered "yes" that day in Bethany. You can, too. But Jesus knows our every weakness, and this reply will work as well: "Yes Lord; I believe. Help me with my unbelief."