

A Family of Suffering – the Role of Suffering in the mission of the Church

By Rev. Matt Aug 7, 2022

Read Acts 7:54-8:1

Story

Adoniram Judson of Burma (now Myanmar) and his wife reached the Rangoon immersing themselves in Burmese language and culture in 1813. Only after 6 years did he feel that he could preach his first sermon, and by their seventh year did they have their first convert to Christianity. It took him 20 years to translate the whole Bible into Burmese, as well as a catechism, a grammar and English-Burmese dictionary which is still in use. The sufferings were intense. He was widowed twice and lost 6 children during his lifetime. He and his family were constantly plagued by illness. During the Anglo-Burmese war he was suspected of being a spy and spent nearly two years in prison enduring chains, heat and filth. And in 37 years of mission service, he returned home to the United States only once.

Yet, as a result of his death and burial in 1850 on Burmese soil he bore much fruit. He left more than 7,000 baptised Burmans and Karens in 63 churches. It is now reckoned that there are more than 3 million Christians in Burma.

John Stot in the book *The Radicle Disciple* (where I sourced this story) goes on to say that “the ‘death’ we are called to die as the condition of fruitfulness may well be less dramatic than martyrdom... It may be a death to comfort and ease, and a separation from home and relatives; or

a death to personal ambition... In these and other ways we may be called to 'die' as the means to a life of fruitfulness.”

Questions

1. What in your life might need to experience 'death' as the means to a life of fruitfulness?
2. What does embracing suffering look like for us today as Christians?
3. How might we bear witness to Christ in the face of ongoing suffering and struggles in these times?

Is it embracing the social discomfort of isolation in joining a church or a small group or volunteering in the community in some way?

Is it engaging with those you would never usually cross paths with?

Is it denying yourself in some way or giving up something in order to have more time, space, money for something or someone else?

Is it opening your wallet or your home to someone in need?

In Sunday's talk I offered 5 observations about suffering as Christians that we find in the New Testament. They were:

1. Suffering is inevitable.
2. Suffering unites the church with Jesus.
3. Suffering gives way to glory.
4. Suffering equips us for ministry.

5. Suffering spreads the Gospel

A while back I came across a blog that made a bold claim - that we've misnamed the Holy Spirit and that it's not the Spirit's job to make us feel better: "Yes, I know, it's not that simple. The Holy Spirit as Comforter eases our distress, encourages us, and comes to us in times of trouble to remind us of Jesus' presence and promises...Why, then, do I think the Holy Spirit is misnamed? Because everywhere I look in these familiar Pentecost texts, the Holy Spirit isn't comforting anyone or anything... but instead is shaking things up." *David Lose – In the Meantime.*

What this says to me is that the role of the Spirit is multifaceted, that the Holy Spirit is as much agitator as well as comforter, disrupter as well as counsellor. I find this quite confronting because I know that I am too attached to my own comfort and concerns, which get in the way of God's work in and through me. Rather than remove our sufferings, the Spirit is at work redeeming it for the good of his kingdom. Rather than remove our fear, the Spirit grants us courage to move forward. Rather than promise constant safety, the Spirit promises God's presence.

Where might the Spirit be wanting to jolt you out of your complacency and provoke you to action?

Quote

Brian Koning writes, "As we develop an understanding of how to approach suffering, we must be clear that suffering never becomes good. Suffering remains evil. What must be understood though, is that suffering can be redeemed; it can be made purposeful [in ways we cannot foresee]. For the Christian, we must see suffering as a trifold call

to long for a better world, to seek to become a better person and to live out a better witness.”

What do you make of Brian’s claim that suffering can be redeemed?

How might you respond to this call to be part of making a better world, becoming better people, and living a better witness?

Spend some time in prayer for one another & waiting on God. Then close by praying this prayer together maybe getting each person in your group to pray one of the following each or all together:

Pray

I do not pray that you will experience no pain and sorrow, but that it will deepen your compassion for others.

I do not pray that you will never be treated unjustly, but that justice will find in you a lifelong defender.

I do not pray that you will not commit any sin, but that your sin will teach you to say, “I’m sorry.”

I do not pray that your life will be easy, but that your labours will be borne with deep conviction.

I do not pray that you will not be exposed to hypocrisy, but that you will not become bitter or disillusioned with life.

I do not pray that you will never fail, but that you will have the courage to carry on.

I do not pray that you will be spared aggression, but that you will be able to mould it into peace.

I do not pray that your life will be long; we pray only that you will live life to the full.

In this way you will live the mystery of the gospel, and the Kingdom of Heaven is yours. Amen