

Suffering for the Sake of the Body: The Pursuit of People Through Pain

by Alex Chediak

**“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”
– Rom. 12:15**

**“For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.”
- II Cor. 4:17-18a**

**“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.”
– I Peter 2:21-23**

Executive Summary

The assignment was to write a 1-3 page letter to someone who has experienced some real suffering, using pastoral sensitivity and biblical insight to bring truth-based, faith-sustaining, gospel-centered, Christ-exalting comfort. I have written to my friend Joe and Tammy Stevenson (not their real names, but they are real people). Joe and Tammy have struggled for over four years with infertility. They recently attempted in vitro fertilization in order to save an embryo from being destroyed and for Tammy to experience the joy of pregnancy. After five months of gestation their son, already named Jonathan, was found to have extra fluid in the brain, a cleft palate, and a right hand that could not be opened. They wept and prayed, and asked others to join them in asking God to heal their child. Several weeks later, an MRI revealed greater developmental complications. Hours later Jonathan died, leaving his parents with devastating, deep-seated grief and many painful, unanswered questions.

Practical Theology

Pastor/Teacher: Dr. John Piper

Executive Pastoral Assistant: Mr. David Mathis

Assignment Due: May 14, 2007

Dear Joe and Tammy,

I weep with you in the midst of your twin sufferings: over four years of infertility and the recent death of your snowflake-adopted, unborn son, Jonathan. Though my wife and I have not experienced this particular grief, I would love to share with you the truths God has used to carry us through other suffering, in the hope that they might be of some encouragement to you.

The bedrock of our hope is that God is not only in total control of the situation, He is in fact causing it to work for eternal good. God is neither unaware of your infertility nor unable to make fertile a barren womb. He was not unable to heal precious Jonathan or prevent his illness. The Bible clearly affirms that God knows all things (Ps. 139), and that He rules the world such that ultimately everything comes to pass according to the counsel of His will (Prov. 16:4, Eccl. 7:14; Eph. 1:11). To recognize God's sovereignty, however, is never to minimize the genuine pain that God sometimes brings our way. On the contrary, it is *because* of God's sovereignty that we can entrust our deepest pain to an all-knowing, all-powerful, loving, faithful God.

So if God could end Tammy's infertility, why doesn't He? And if he could have prevented Jonathan's death, why didn't He? I don't want to minimize this vexation by pretending that I know all the intricacies of God's plan for you, because I don't. But the Bible does allow us to glean some truths about His intentions. First, natural maladies (such as infertility or illness) are a means whereby God demonstrates, in the physical world, the moral and spiritual horror of God-dishonoring sin in His universe. This does *not* mean that it is necessarily *your* sin, as individuals, which caused this infertility. Rather, your infertility is part of the groaning of the entire creation, as we await our adoption as sons of God (Rom. 8:23) – the consummation of our salvation, when God will wipe every tear from our eyes (Rev. 7:16-17).

Second, triumphs of faith and obedience in the midst of intense suffering are vivid testimonies to a watching, unbelieving world of the preciousness of Christ. Suffering not only weans us off of self and onto God's grace (II Cor. 1:8-9), but it sets a Christ-like example (I Pet. 2:21-23), powerfully illumining God's grace, and thereby making it more visible and winsome to others (Phil. 2:14-15). What makes Christ look more beautiful to unbelievers: Christians living a life of relative ease, or Christians joyfully clinging to Christ on a path of suffering? When all goes well for us, the world may think our love for God is conditional, as Satan did in the case of Job (Job 1:9-11). But when we cling to God in the midst of inexplicable grief, the world takes notice and recognizes the comparable shallowness of their pleasure and the relative futility of their hope. The embrace of suffering is a visible expression of our witness to Christ.

Paul gives a third statement of purpose as he's expressing thanksgiving for his own suffering: the comfort that God gives us in the midst of affliction allows us to comfort others *with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God* (II. Cor. 1:4, emphasis mine). In other words, there are levels of comfort that you, Joe and Tammy, can extend to others (e.g., infertile parents and those who have suffered a miscarriage) that I probably cannot.

And fourthly, God develops in us greater depths of yieldedness to Him by means of suffering. There is a quality of joy that God produces in us when we endure hardship by His sustaining grace. Perhaps this is why so many great saints have testified that significant advances in their walks with God came primarily by means of suffering. The pain engenders a sensible awareness that this world is not our true home, which increases our longing for heaven and contentment in God. That Paul calls his sufferings "light momentary affliction" (II Cor. 4:17) is more amazing when we consider the extent of his suffering – If continual beatings, danger, and betrayal are "light and momentary," then the "eternal weight of glory" must truly be

indescribably wonderful. Incredibly, even Jesus “learned obedience” by what He *suffered* (Heb. 5:8). Since Jesus never sinned (Heb. 4:15), this phrase must mean that, over time, He was able to pass successfully more difficult tests of obedience, culminating ultimately in enduring the cross (Phil. 2:8). If Jesus needed suffering to grow in God-glorifying effectiveness, how much more must we?

What should we do, then, in the midst of suffering? We fight to remember that these afflictions are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory (II Cor. 4:17), even as we cry out to God, the One who has kept count of our tossings, and put our tears in His bottle (Ps. 56:8). And we cling to Him, trusting that He has not abandoned us (even if it sometimes feels like He has).

In closing, I would encourage you that the grief of infertility and the loss of Jonathan is experienced under the banner of “sorrowful-yet-always-rejoicing” that hangs over the entire Christian life (II Cor. 6:10). And not just for you, but for all of us. We’re living in between two great eras: the Kingdom of God has broken into this world, but it is not yet fully consummated. We’ve been delivered from the power of sin, but not yet from its influence. Likewise, Christ has purchased the healing of all our diseases (Isa. 53:5), but we don’t yet experience perfect healing in this life. Though He has conquered the grave, we too will die. God can and sometimes does heal infertility and unborn babies. And sometimes He does not. Either way, He himself remains our lifeline and His steadfast love remains better than life (Ps. 63:3). Because He is holy, you can cling to Him in your abyss. And because He is holy, He will never let you go.

In Christ alone,

Alex Chediak