

Suffering

-Through the Apparent

Silence of God

Beverley Russell

This book is dedicated to all those of God who have suffered in their lifetime, often with a “no” answer.

They know the refining fire and they know that such suffering teaches us hope and faith in Him when there is nothing else.

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- *“Depression - when all might seem lost”*
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Studies in Dysfunction in Godly Families During the Patriarchal Age - The stories of Genesis - A Consideration of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph” (600 pages)

Foreword

It seems that there are many resources on the subject of suffering and disappointment with God's answer to our prayers, and included in those are many wise sayings immediately pertinent to the point. They are often put in a clever and meaningful and pithy way and they do add a sharp and concise message on the subject. I do pay tribute for my debt to those authors who have helped me in stimulating my feelings, thoughts and expressions on the subject.

However, nothing that I have read in the literature on the subject of suffering, with reference to Job and other worthy sufferers in Scripture, either in my religious faith, or any other literature by those outside that faith, has hit the gnawing spot in my heart and the disappointment I so keenly felt with the pain of the "no" answer, which has occurred in my life. So I have tried to put together something that helped me.

Perhaps it will help others who are also disappointed and still searching. The discussion is drawn out piece by piece over the entirety of this booklet. A slow discussion is necessary for such a complicated subject and will only have relevance to those who are troubled by the outcomes in their lives, when they see others with different answers.

There are some ideas on God's responses to His people in the Old and New Testaments with some discussion on the different methods God used to inform about His purpose, and to punish wickedness and sin. It also seems imperative to understand that God's son came not to do miracles and healing with big power displays, but to grow faithful and resilient men through unhealed suffering, men who demonstrate their love not in the going down, but in the rising up.

As well, the question of large scale suffering in racial or national trauma is discussed, where many people seemingly suffer to the end without relief. There is an attempt to answer that, and to show how God might work with His people to bring about more people to His name and purpose. It can then be better understood how the wholesale and national suffering, which some people go through, is never relieved, and from which they die terrible deaths. In their dying, still bound by bonds of evil, there are some precious souls who, rising above the evil, ask, Christ like, that the evil ones are forgiven. God cares less for winning causes than He does for winning men, and sometimes the former cause is sacrificed for the cause of the latter. But in that endless suffering, it is a

fact that God remembers the fruits of goodness derived from the ill will of the evil ones. There is a greatness of heart which grows out of that evil, especially in the prayers of those that suffer. May it be that in the importuning, and the fruit that has been borne from the suffering, there will be the forgiveness of the evil ones. In any case we can always remember that the joyous Sunday comes after the terrible Friday (that is, resurrection after crucifixion).

As needs be, there is a discussion on the incomprehensible measures God uses in our suffering and on the disappointing “no” answer. That is caused by a misunderstanding, where our measure is quite different to His measure, a state which is hard for us to grasp.

There are 27 discussions, each sufficient for one thought for the day, not dependent on one another and sometimes with repeating pertinent points. Each one works through a set program of understanding where hopefully we grow in faith and hope, to appreciate tragedy and suffering.

I have reaped more than I sowed in putting down these thoughts. Green pastures have replaced the desert, and there is still water, when there was groaning and a flooded torrent. I am restored by His shepherding rod and staff for my forward journey. My cup is overflowing with goodness and now I am drinking, as the song says, from my saucer. I am blessed that as the Lord speaks to me, that I may speak, and as He fills me with His fullness and my heart and my cup overflows, then I may also tell of His overflowing love to praise Him.



Contents

Foreword	3
1. About suffering	6
2. Is God hiding His face when He is seemingly silent?	8
3. Why does it have to be suffering that leads us to the joy?	10
4. What do we learn from our suffering?	12
5. Hope in a future, when there seems no future in suffering	14
6. When the answer from God is “No” and the suffering continues.....	16
7. Are we disappointed with God when we suffer?	18
8. More than importuning in importuning for our suffering hearts	20
9. If the answer is “no”, what then does God offer in our suffering?	22
10. Clear words from God about suffering - creation to the kings	24
11. Different words from God about suffering - kings to the prophets.....	26
12. Jesus’ answers, about God’s apparent silence, were still not enough	28
13. Was the mission of the son of God perceived as a failure?	30
14. What did the terrible crucifixion do for us in our suffering?	32
15. How did God instruct the people now about joy and suffering?	34
16. Our righteous response to God is His reward.....	36
17. God’s measure is not our measure	38
18. Love God and be content with the “no” answer to our suffering	40
19. Are we satisfied with God’s answer about suffering?	42
20. We are incomplete without the mind of God in suffering	44
21. We are surprised by time in our joys and our sufferings	46
22. Miracles in our time of suffering	48
23. We are surprised by any joy found in suffering	50
24. Memories are important in suffering	52
25. Choices to make in our suffering	54
26. God’s non answer in our suffering.....	56
27. God’s promises to us in our suffering.....	58

Supplementary works to this discussion are noted on the cover pages.



Suffering *- Through the Apparent Silence of God*

1. About suffering

To people who are suffering, the gospel sounds like the good news that it really is. It offers hope and comfort, with no threat of punishment. Even in the most hopeless situations where it seems to others that there should be no reprieve, there is hope. So it really is good news.

Suffering is a great equalizer, for it can apply to young or old, to weak or strong, to rich or poor, to black or white and to every national identity. As well, it applies to humans who are more good than evil, and to those who are more evil than good. Suffering does not divide people, for it strikes inside every human heart, where we know there is a divided heart. We find therein good and evil, and it is suffering which more amply divides that two way heart

If God is with us, suffering stirs and nourishes the goodness in our hearts, so, as some have done, we can say *“thank you for this evil prison in which we have entered”*. Suffering humbles everyone and no sufferer is self important and proud. There is no competition to have more suffering. **Sufferers of all persuasions long for help, and plead to be reclaimed from the pit.**

Sufferers cry out for solutions and when none comes, the comforters who have come to help in the difficulty, are as impotent as the trees. Comforters cannot solve problems and do not recognize their impotence to heal a permanent disability, or to change the behaviour of a tormentor. No one can manage that, so no one can claim the cure. Some bystanders turn away and walk on the other side, maybe for selfish reasons, or for religious reasons, but comforters go down onto the road and into the pit with the sufferer and find an understanding of love and grace there, and a healing of sorts. They recognize that God is in that place there. **God blesses the tormented sufferers and the comforters alike, when they are both in place, because His face shines in the pit.**

Suffering can make us interdependent for we cease to be safe in our own secure life potential. No sufferer is self sufficient. Everyone suffers at some time or other in their life, and all sufferers need help. Blessings and spiritual growth are in the giving (for comforters) and the receiving (for sufferers) but ultimately the eventual **dependence on God is the only true safety net.**

Suffering people have no desire to think of the possessions in their lives. People are important, things are not important, luxuries become a burden. The physical necessities of life are a sufferer's only need. Godly sufferers learn patience, dogged patience, until they become helpless God loving saints, with a never ending source of importuning, with a bothering of the Father, day and night, in every waking hour. The importuning for a list of things gradually becomes a soothing silence, as the silent partner with God realizes that God already knows what is required.

Sufferers abandon reason and ask for the seemingly impossible, with an uncomplicated sense of being able to whisper in the ear of the Father. They have learned to trust their dependency on God and His love, and earnestly do so without regard to criticism. **This approach to God, in the terrible need, will not strengthen any character towards independence, but it will strengthen the connection with the Father.**

There is a fatigue in trying to escape from the suffering, when it seems that it never ends. It is a tormenting thorn, a weeping sore, and any transforming acceptance seems elusive yet. Poverty, poor in spirit, mourners, the meek and helpless, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, those who need mercy and peace, those persecuted for righteousness sake, those reviled and accused of all manner of evil “... *Rejoice and be exceedingly glad for your reward is in heaven*, Matthew 5. **They/we are all dependent sufferers, long sufferers, with a joy in the future.**



2. Is God hiding His face when He is seemingly silent?

Job said, *“I go to the east, He is not there,
I go to the west, I do not find Him,
When He is at work in the north I do not see Him,
When He turns south I catch no glimpse of Him”*.

God is often seemingly hidden, but His silence, His deafness, His blindness are all part of His plan to strengthen our relationship with Him. If we do not let it destroy us, what does not destroy us, makes us stronger, for there is no virtue in standing still, and standing still is really no option. So that suffering can, as well, be creative of goodness and understanding in the consideration of our calamities, and the calamities that befall others. **The cross we bear makes its mark and redeems us from the obsession we had about righting things that cannot be righted.**

Actually God invites us into that hiding holy place of His, if we confess our iniquities and our transgressions, and place ourselves on His love and mercy. His mercy shall compass us about so that when we are afraid and fearful in the suffering place, the songs of deliverance about that hiding place will encourage us to be fearless and strong, for *“Thou art my hiding place”*. Psalm 32, and He assures us that *“there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known”*, Luke 12:3. **That place with God is a Most Holy Place.**

People band together closely with others in order to commit violence or suppression with impunity, and they trumpet the need for secure, rigid conformity to exclude differences of any sort. They fear change so much that they feel the need to control to keep safe. Then they deform into a society less compelling than it ought to be, good will is absent, and an evil takes over. Sadly then the original purpose of something very valuable is destroyed.

“Pain and death”, or *“food and life”* are choices incarcerated people are asked to decide for themselves, while around them all the forces in these basic human needs are pushed and pulled 24 hours a day. It is with profound courage and compassion that sufferers survive the inhuman dignities placed upon them by captors, and torturers, and they need to remember that it is easier to receive the pain and moan with it, than it is to be the source of the inhuman behaviour, for there is no escaping the human consciousness that makes inhumanity possible. So, in that sense, **human captors or persecutors and torturers are always worse off than their prisoners, or those who they torment.**

The tortured one has a choice to react in his/her own personal way. It is an inner decision, and not necessarily the result of the extremities that have befallen them. It is possible to preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, even in the most horrendous extremities that man may lay upon another man. That transforms an evil circumstance from darkness to light, from certain death to everlasting life, from a terrible hell to a brightness where heaven's angels dwell. Daniel's three friends in the furnace were accompanied in that terrifying ordeal by a fourth, a protecting angel from God. **They saw Him with them in the fire, as we also can "see" Him, when all else fails.**

There can be a deep hurt and anger against God for His seeming abandonment in His hiddenness, so we need to remember to impress upon ourselves, that God does not turn a deaf ear and a blind eye, as it seems, and as CS Lewis described the fearful feeling. **God does see and hear in the camps of the evil ones, and not only that, but He assures us that He is there in the middle of the evil.** He does not forsake those sons and daughters of His as it seems, for He sets the joy before them, and will send an accompanying angel to bear them up in the extreme. He wants us to "*LOOK UP*", but if we are so deep in the pit in the evil camp with our eyes permanently cast down, alas we find, miraculously, and mercifully that He is there with us. He is not hidden, and He whispers, "**Look up, look up for I am here with you**".



3. Why does it have to be suffering that leads us to the joy?

That “*suffering before the joy*”, that “*cross before the crown*”, means **we have to believe in advance that the joy will come far into the future**. The Father may not rescue us or make the suffering easier, but He has promised to be there with us in the suffering, and to reassure us that the future joy is there for we “*suffer for righteousness sake ... be not afraid*”, and “*it is better ... to suffer for well doing, than for evil doing*”, 1 Peter 3:14-17.

It is not the reasons for the suffering that we should be looking at, but why the suffering begins and continues. The why of God’s silence, sealed lips and deaf ears, is the issue that we have trouble accepting. It might be that fear of abandonment when He has so much more of greater importance on His mind than our seemingly insignificant perils. He has envisaged suffering as part of our contract with Him, but we might feel it is out of control. We feel, like Job, that He is not in the north, south, east or west. He must have abandoned us already. “*How can He be here with us?*”, and that concern leads some of us to deny His presence. Suffering can lead us into a hopeless pit, if we allow ourselves to go there and like frozen assets, or a tied up bank account, all our knowledge of God is worthless and no earthly good. That breeds faithlessness. **And faithlessness hangs like a heavy stone about our neck, weighing us down, further into the mire of the pit. It seems sometimes that the weight cannot be cast aside. Then God is abandoned.**

But it is not like that for everyone, not for those of us who are firmly rooted with the Father. **We are assured that the body of Christ is there, in the most terrible suffering, for he was there before we were there.** Where there is a chink of light, or a touch of a hand, or a glance, or a look, or a tiny kindness done, that indicates that the body of Christ is there, responding. Isolation and despair can be counteracted by the defining influence of God in the small things, if only we will look and see. For this comforting message, it is well worth the risk of a tiny message in a dangerous place, an eye message, a finger message, a message from God of His love, in this seemingly God forsaken place of a torture chamber.

If I will not abandon God for any cause, then suffering has a meaning for me, only me, for no one can see it or feel any meaning, only me. It is me who has to take my eyes from the backward glance and focus forwards, looking up. In suffering I can discover myself in the “*looking up*”, and with that opportunity well serve my suffering. Or I, as a comforter, can also discover myself in the opportunity to love and serve a sufferer helping them “*to look up*”.

Is that the reason for suffering, that, in the needs around us, we can help others in their suffering? Or is there more? There is the constant view of us and our suffering, to our friends and the lessons they learn from watching us “suffer well”. We know *"Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep"*. So in the continuing and constant prayers for relief from suffering there is a general acceptance and understanding for everyone in how God works His way. However, **we know that He may say “no”, and that the suffering from the “no” will recede. So in all circumstances we can be hopeful, and grow faith. And we can still say, “God is good”, even in the most terrible suffering.**

1 Peter 1:6-9 tells us that our *“heaviness”*, in our trials, is only for a season and that trial borne is more precious to God than gold. That praise and honour, and the glory given to God will be recognized at Christ’s appearing, when we shall obtain *"the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls"*. The reason for our trials, troubles and suffering, is so that our faith will grow. Verse 6 says, *"...even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith....even though tested by fire, may result in the praise and glory and honour of God in return"*. **With Peter’s Godly advice and this knowledge and picture in our minds, we are clothed with a panoply of faith, which can even better protect us as we move through the vicissitudes of our life, in all our sufferings and in all our torments.**



4. What do we learn from our suffering?

There are times we don't do so well in our trials, but we know that we can still learn from our mistakes, and troubles, and keep heading towards our goal of perfectness with Him. This hopefulness underlines our disappointment in ourselves, when we grieve again and again. However we know we can be where Jacob was after his long life, a life often tainted with deceit and suffering, but perfected in his death. There are hundreds of questions for discussion in Genesis, for which we have no answers, but we can see lessons there. **It is the understanding we bring to those questions (not the answers), which we can value most.**

Suffering is so that faith can grow, not only our own faith but other people's faith, as well. For in our own death even in a holocaust, there can still be reasons and lessons to be learned by others. It is interesting that with children in hospital, even in their dying, so carers say, it is imperative to keep encouraging them in good behaviour for their own sake. It is so they can rise above the trauma and think about the love that they have and react accordingly with obedience. Of course, a child does not know that he can be "*made perfect through suffering*", but a child does know (or should know) obedience. In obedience even in childlike faith and hope, there is a goodness learned. We know that Christ "*learned obedience by the things he suffered*". It was the faith he had in his Father, and the hope of things to come that made him perfect in his suffering.

"I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it", Mat 16:18. **No darkness is too great for God, for no trial, no suffering, is beyond the transforming power of God.** The pattern of bad transforming into good, finds the afflicted victim blessed, and ready to understand. Its fullest expression is in Jesus and his suffering. Christ needed to suffer, and Peter, not understanding, tried to spare him suffering, and was reproved by Christ, Matthew 26:51. So even if we try to stem some suffering, storms, microbes, tragedy, natural disasters, medical calamities and the evil of men, suffering will not pass us by. "*By his wounds we are healed*", Isaiah 53:5 and we think of **holocaust victims who turned the evil of men into a service for good, or the promise of good, praying, "Forgive them, for they know not ..."**.

We are not promised prosperity and comfort as God promised the old faithful men, but we are promised a fourth man in the fire. The body of Christ is the means by which we learn from the suffering, because all those in the body grow together and learn about suffering. **He is the man in the fire with us.** It would be easy to avoid those in need. The widowed, unemployed, aged, invalids,

divorced, persecuted, those lonely and those lied about are all in need, as well as the culturally deprived and the national outcasts, but our presence with the loving concern of comforters, is God beside those sufferers. That causes us to act, for we would be like Him.

What sounds bitter to us can be transformed into a sweetness in the soul.

The troubled intensity of the question in our minds is answered with the sweetness of understanding and love, and our salvation is assured. It is not the learning of the doctrines, or the understanding of the terms and conditions of the future Kingdom which prepare us for that end Kingdom. **It is the understanding of Him now, and His offer of completeness in Him, which is the basis on which all the other may be placed for consideration. That is Kingdom living now.**

Some do suffer more than others, and we constantly hear of people far worse off than we are. *“I complained, with no shoes, until I met a man who had no feet.”* However some are more able for tragedy than others, and God does take that into account as well. So our reasoning needs to fall back to our individual relationship with God and how He can save us from being overwhelmed.

When we are beset by tragedy of any sort, the degree of it is not the point. **It is how we relate to God in His decisions about us.** He loves us very much and recognizes the difficulties if we build good relationships with others, making good responses in love even to those who oppress us. That will please Him. **That is the lesson He wants us to learn.**



5. Hope in a future, when there seems no future in suffering

As every disappointment falls like a veil over my hope, I need to find a fresh reason for looking forward again and again, in faith and hope. It is like lifting that heavy veil again to look up where He is. It is imperative to keep on doing that to see Him without despair. Hope, faith and purpose are the key essentials for looking forward, for without hope there is a risk of giving up the journey. **People with hope and faith and purpose have a choice even when there is no evidence.**

Hope is necessary in every human condition. The hope and joys need to continue in our lives, so that we can continue to be hopeful and joyful. The hopeless miseries of poverty, sickness, captivity and evil speaking would be, without the comfort of hope, insupportable. So hope and joy, in a daily dose, whatever is the condition, is necessary. Psalm 62:5, *“My soul, wait in silence for God only, for my hope is from Him”*. We are told they can be found in the most extreme situation.

Hope is a determined faith that something good is ahead. It is more than optimism, for hope implies courage to keep it real. Romans 8:24-25. *“Hope that is seen is not hope, for what a man seeth, why doeth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.”* **Hope involves a leap of faith with courage, not just a looking on the bright side, but a living there in that bright side, and a loving on the bright side, when it is still dark and unknown.** We find we do not know what to pray for in our extremities, and sometimes we cannot even pray at all. But we are assured that at that time of confusion *“the Spirit makes intercession for us”* (verse 27). *“Continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel”*, Col 1:23, 27, and that *“Christ in you is the hope of glory”*.

Chronic illness, or terrible incarceration, or the birth of a disabled child, or trying to live under people who tell lies about those they should love, all create people who are long suffering. Long sufferers are mentioned with great integrity on the Bible, those who are blessed with good fruit. It is one of the collective fruit of the spirit of Galatians 5, *“love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance”*

Hope is not a guarantee for present relief, but if the required hope fails to be realized now, it is not that God has let down the sufferer. God will actually use the continuing infirmity, the continual torture, the unrelenting tragedy, the ongoing situation of falsehood to produce goodness. When and if suffering passes and the darkness lifts, and we are out of the pit, then we see the

weapon with which we can defend others in need. We can honour the suffering of others without judgment, that they are in the pit where we were, and now, through the trial they now endure, we can also service their needs and be with them in the suffering pit.

Death, where is thy sting? Grave, where is thy victory, Suffering, where is thy joy? Torment, where is thy glory? Where is the hope of glory again? When will it be all joy? Where is the victory from the sting of death? Why does it all have to be so prolonged and never the promised relief?

If you believe in the God's love, you believe Someone is there. Someone is watching as life ticks away. Someone loves you, and if you have hope then there is the overwhelming feeling that it is fully worth the risking of a life to go forward, for that Someone goes with you.

When the answer from the Father is “no”, and when the importuning fails (maybe for the life of a child, or for a burden that is never lifted), what then? It is as if the door is slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double locking on the inside, as CS Lewis put it.

There has been the overall dependence upon God, and all that the suffering taught us, wasn't that enough? Why is the answer “No”? It is then that **the future can only turn into hope.**



6. When the answer from God is “No” and the suffering continues

David sinned, and Nathan recorded that sin, and rightly predicted to David that the child of the sin would die. David “*fasted*” and “*endured the sour grapes with his teeth on edge*”, but God’s answer was still “*No*”. When the child died, David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and came into the house of the Lord. He feasted on bread after his fast, and it was butter and honey and sweetness for him again. That is the story of suffering, first a prayer for deliverance, then with the “*No*” answer, a recovery - all in a nutshell. **So recovery even from the “No” answer is possible.**

(There will be grief over the lost thing, and that grief and its recovery are not dealt with here, but in “*Travelling Through Tragedy, Carrying Burdens and Managing Life’s Unavoidable Sadness*”, available from the same author.)

“*Make thy way plain before my face*”. God did for Stephen in his death, and for John Baptist, and He did for Jesus Christ. There are profound moral lessons in these cases of terrible suffering and the grief that they bore, especially as they said, “*Forgive them....* “. We may not suffer more than we can bear according to His promise, but we will suffer. To suffer is His refining purpose with us.

It is most difficult for groups in their collective prayers to pray for those who are very ill and dying. It is hard for us individually to pray for those who are suffering when the likely answer seems “*No*”. We often learn that our solutions are not God’s solutions, so how can we pray for recovery, or a quick uncomplicated death? **The loss of confidence with the “No” outcome of the desperate importuning recognizes a need to place something more with the importuning.** After the importuning prayer for relief is answered with a “*No*”, we know now that the very best prayer we can offer is for **God to be there** in the torture house, in the sickroom, with those who lose loved ones, with the person who endures falsehood, or with the person of unsound mind.

It was said at the time of the plague in London, that God had turned His face away and was “*asleep*”. That is the opinion of those who are not close with God. Many people in a time of suffering with no relief in sight find an excuse to go from God. Those with a Godly purpose do not.

Those who suffer early in life often exhibit a remarkable maturity and they can steel themselves and know that **abusers suffer more than they as abusers realize.** Some victims see the inevitable dehumanization of the tormentors as they continue to inflict pain. If the evil aim is to dehumanize people the victims can often rise above that terrible suffering. Then inflicting more suffering only

dehumanizes the abusers. If we find this a paradox we must be content to leave the victims to speak, for it is unrealistic to judge such suffering if one has not been there.

The mentally ill trying to reconcile a life out of control, often feel dehumanized and that they can never get it right. No one can live, like Macbeth, in the dark night, devoid of moral purpose, and where life has no value, and no inherent point to it. **So how each one is delivered from the suffering he endures is between himself and God. It is only for us to stand by and praise God for His gift of life in the face of the victim's death or despite, supporting when we can.**

Abraham blindly carried out God's seemingly pointless command to commit the unthinkable, to bind and sacrificially murder his only child. In the light of His promises to Adam to replenish the earth, and to Abraham of fathering a great nation, it was illogical. **Moral human beings in their search for truth bow to things that are beyond their understanding and reason. It was so for Abraham's religious and faithful attitude, for he was almost beyond human terms at this point.** We cannot reason that circumstance out. So, **blessed is the man who does not need to know the answers to every question. The perfection of Jacob over his lifetime is a remarkable, evolving thing of God, with plenty of "No" answers. We cannot question that, but we can try to understand God's unique way with us.**



7. Are we disappointed with God when we suffer?

So what then is the alternative - disappointment WITHOUT God? We would not want that!

Even though he were yet dead?” John 11:25. Even though your brother is dead? *“Believeth thou this?”* And Martha did believe. So even in terrible disappointment we are assured that relief will occur in some form.

The Bible never belittles disappointment. There are chapters of disappointment in Job, on anguish and despair and plenty of arguments. There is only one chapter on restoration in Job, *“Then Job answered ...”* (42). **The Psalms are full of how to deal with suffering and the hurts of our enemy, those who torture and revile and torment and threaten, telling lies about us. Each message sends us back to God and His ways, to heal our disappointment with Him.**

What needs to be known is that what we feel now, will not continue. It will gradually be replaced by a more peaceful outlook on the situation. **If God is your friend you cannot struggle with God.** Jacob could not struggle with the angel, who left him with a shuffling limp, a cliky hip, a shortened sinew, and a damaged sciatic nerve and arthritis. What would Jacob prefer? Surely he chose to bear the pain, and be reminded of a wrestle with God, than to be relieved of the pain, and forget Him. Paul, with his thorn in the flesh learned that it was best to bear it as a message from God, about dependence, and not to struggle any more for the healing of the thorn.

Our disappointment is in itself a sign that we hunger for something better, and whatever our suffering situation and disappointment with the outcome, that we will in time regain a better outlook. As we ache for something better, we long for a sign from God. In the absence of a sign/message from God, our faith and our hope are the longings for the end of the journey. We know that *“he will wipe our eyes of tears”*, and that *“our flesh will see God”*, no more mourning, no more death, no crying, no pain, no more fear and no more disappointment then, but what about now? The great promise is that we will see it all with our own eyes in future. **So now we must do the mourning, and the tears and enduring the fear and pain and the disappointment?**

2 Corinthians 1:3-7 (NIV), *“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us*

in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble, with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation. If we are comforted it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm because we know that just as you share in our sufferings so also you share in our comfort.

The worry and the fret of what is left, together with the thinking that no good can ever come, makes the terrible disappointment seem overwhelming. However none of us should ever risk rejection though, because God's disappointment with us would be catastrophic and with His rejection of us, we will be far worse off. We may never know the purpose of our suffering, but we can rest assured that God has a purpose. So if we can come to terms with loss and trauma and tragedy, or forgiving the unforgivable, and even asking for blessings upon evil ones, we are well equipped. It is the demonstration of God's mercy and His love and His compassion. In that, we are expressing His grace which we learned from Him. The subject of forgiveness is not expanded here, but dealt with more fully in "*Forgiveness and Reconciliation*" by the same author.

To rectify injustice, instead of continuing in angst over the evil, it often means that we go down a dark and complex path, coming to terms with our loss of character, or a loss of physical or mental ability. Then at the end of that path, God will transform us into a true child of His, where we will, like Him, embrace and extend forgiveness. With our good fruit we will remember not the evil and the evil one. This is how God wins the evil men, for it is their redemption also, when they seek it.



8. More than importuning in importuning for our suffering hearts

Whatever the outcome of our prayers, if we are to have an effective lifeline relationship with Him, we need to grow close to Him and “*Pray without ceasing*” takes on a new meaning. Without ceasing? One cannot keep up a list of importunings day in and day out and so “*without ceasing*” must mean to be in such a close relationship with God that He knows our list before we ask. **Our prayer life then becomes a state of mind not just a list of requested items.**

Tragedy teaches us that there is something much more to importuning in importuning. It is something which accompanies the importuning list, and more than the regular occasional turning to God in prayer. It is such a close relationship with God, constantly LOOKING UP, always needing to be in that holy state, so that He knows our needs before we ask. That holy state also enables us to know what God wants of us. **If our close relationship with God is not there in our prayer life any importuning will be impotent. How can we ask Him to be there with us in the suffering, if He does not already walk with us? When there is a negative answer or a denial result to our prayer, then we will not appreciate His message, and that will crush us. We may then be in danger of wandering away from Him into a dark wilderness.**

If we can think of those who suffer in gulags and camps and in terrible regimes, on and on for years and years, and never lose their faith, there must be some wondrous state of grace which sustains them. Those who go to their executions like Nurse Cavell, (WW1) forgiving her tormentors and wanting God to be seen in the suffering, point the way to the answer. It was the same for John Baptist, the same for stoned Stephen, and the same for Jesus the Christ. “*Forgive them...*” It is the same for our loved ones who die from long mental or physical illnesses who take their struggle in God’s name, and for Him. Any struggle in His name is a bonus for Him.

“If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee ...,” Daniel 3.

Those incarcerated in terrible pits, as Nelson Mandela was, vow that good can be found everywhere. Even in the endless Robbens Island Solitary Confinement it was possible to find there a liberty to use the endless moments alone, for loving and for thinking and future planning, in his case, for the millions of blacks who daily struggled for life in South Africa. **In that disconnection from the real world, in wicked isolation, consideration of one’s own life blood and the force which courses through those veins can still be dedicated to God. That is indeed a true walk with God.**

As God was there in that furnace with the three friends of Daniel, so it is for us as well. It is that God is there in the terrible pit. That thought, in itself, is a liberty. We pray then for God to be there to uphold the suffering one, so that they can bear the suffering and become a testimony for Him.

We know that the importuning of some mothers does not always save their sons. We know that the importuning of the Shunammite woman did save her son. It is not to do with the sons of the mothers, or the sins of the mothers, or the amount of faith of the sons or of the mothers, it is to do with the will of the Heavenly Father and His purpose.

It is not a lack of faith to cry to God, “*but If not...*”. We need to focus on God, and help our loved ones to focus on Him, so that whatever happens, life or death, the comfort of His presence overrides it all. They are then held tightly in the palm of His hand. We can encourage ourselves and our group prayers to pray earnestly for the recovery of our loved ones, but if not, then that God will be with them, holding their hands lifting them up, easing their pain, sustaining them through the dying and death, holding them in the palm of His hand until they too are at peace.

The pain of suffering is like a broadcasted message from God, and indeed the thunderings and the lightnings when He does speak, herald that He is near. We need only listen.



9. If the answer is “no”, what then does God offer in our suffering?

God does not offer us a peaceful way to come into suffering or to approach death, but He does offer ways to overcome the apprehension of the circumstance. Even then, God is not satisfied only to offer life and death but He also offers the after life, eternal life in his future kingdom on this earth. That is the ultimate gift.

The message of 1 Corinthians 15 is about life and death and resurrection and how love transforms us. Those words “*corruptible*” and “*incorruptible*” have significant meaning for those approaching death. And Proverbs 3:20-26 also reassures the weak who are slowly trying to move towards a spiritually discernable future. “*When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid; yea thou shalt lie down and thy sleep will be sweet*”. Those who have lost their strength can be at ease in the circumstance where God has placed them and are encouraged and reassured with God’s provision of eternal care. We are also all encouraged by “*Be not afraid of those who kill the body*”, for they cannot kill the soul, and that suffering is like a speck in eternity, for “*after they have suffered awhile*”, 1 Peter 5:10, “*the God of all grace ... will make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you*”. We know that God is with us in all the torment with this promised comfort. He is the Comforter, as the gold in us is being refined.

“For our light affliction, which is just for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but the things which are not seen : for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal”, 2 Corinthians 4:17-18. “*Light affliction*”? Sometimes it does not seem “*light*”! It seems to be eternal torment. That is because I am mistaken, for my ways are temporal, and a dot on the horizon for God. It is the ways of God which are eternal.

And as spiritual maturity takes its place, we are often more easily able to understand that to be a victim is better than to be a perpetrator of persecution. The human consciousness of inhuman behaviour is quite acute, and we can readily see cruelty. The cruel will always have a doubt as well. Although it is possible to be swayed by harsh individuals or misled groups of people, or evil nations, who think they have a right to exclude and persecute, there is always a doubt. God can fan that doubt until He is ready to release the sufferer.

God also offers us the information that no one is born wicked, or cruel. Self concerned for survival maybe, but never in combat mode so that we, as

newborns, terrorize other people for our own survival. **Torture or inflicting pain on others is a learned response.** If deep down in every heart is love and what we know is right, how does it come about that some of us end up hating, so that there is an evil will, with cruel exclusion? Is it worth then retracing our steps to the initial and lovely and all encompassing response we have one for another as newborns in Christ?

Before he was made whole again Job (19:20, 21) said “*My bone cleaveth to my skin, and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth*”. “*The hand of God hath touched me.*”, he said (Job 19:20, 21). **Suffering is in God’s design system for it equips us for life now and the future.** We can speak to Him, like, “*rouse yourself, God, for you have forgotten us? Why are you silent? Are you asleep?*” or “*Awake, why sleepest thou, O Lord? Arise, cast us not off forever. Wherefore hidest thou thy face, and forgettest our affliction and our oppression. For our soul is bowed down in the dust: and our belly cleaveth unto the earth*”, Ps 44: 23-24. **That’s how it feels, in the forsaken and the forgotten state, and “forever” appears to be the message.**

When, Lord when? When will this oppression cease? Joseph always heard the “soon, soon, soon” croon from God, “Be patient I am ever near”. Similarly, “*not yet, not yet*”, God says to us, and we do not know when the “yet” will be, but our trust in God is building in the pit, and the letting go and letting God, is working towards our release from the pit. That is His offering to us in our suffering.



10. Clear words from God about suffering - creation to the kings

There were always clear words and messages from God to His people in the OT – which tree to eat of, when to build an ark, manna from heaven, sandals never wearing out, when to stay and when to move on, how to spy, when to make war, and when to leave it to God, and even a brazen serpent to look upon if they were harmed, a wonderful sign of compassion, used even today.

God did not hide from the wilderness Israelites, for in the wonderful familiarity with Him, with Moses' shining face and the tables of stone, they had every proof that He was with them. There were rules on how to worship, but even that did not make obedient children. God's life instruction and every provision of over reaching care, made little difference to the Israelites. They responded with ill temper, sin, evil, unfaithfulness and rebellion and they turned their eyes to other gods, and they listened unhearing to the His songs He sung them about the hiding of His face from them, if they continued in their sin. They said to God "All that you have said we will do", but they did not.

Why did their faith falter and their hope desert them? Why did their evil ways bring them so much pleasure in the vast desert in the 40 years journey, and later in their life in the chosen land? They did not thirst in the waterless land. They were fed and sheltered. God made every provision for their health and safety and their worship of Him even with special day and night lights in the sky. But that was not enough, and they asked for a king saying, "*We want to be like the other nations round about*". Seeking to emulate the glory of the other nations in their admiration, they turned away their attention from the desires of God.

Was it that God was too close and that He tended them too closely? That cannot possibly be so. Or was it that there were not enough willing hearts to respond to God, making good relationships with Him? So, **when God gave them choice of will their hearts took them towards evil. Why?**

God, even in His disappointment with His people, granted them a king, when they asked Him. He promised, "*My eyes and my heart will always be there,*" 1 Kings 9:3, in the glory of Solomon's Temple. Yet in one generation, with all the gifts that anyone would ever want from God, and even with the notable gift of wisdom from God, Solomon took Israel from a kingdom dependent on God for every convenience, to a great political and powerful force. But on the way Solomon forsook God and encouraged his subjects to admire their king and his visage, and turned that kingdom into something closely resembling the Egypt from which they had fought so hard to escape.

We often feel God's unfairness, and His silence, and His hiddenness and so we too have major reasons for disappointment with Him. **However, if God leaves room for doubts and doubters, and we know He does, He also leaves room for the faithless, and, in my disappointment, even for me.** If there is room for me in my rebellion and disappointment, what is the difference?

The relationship with God must be the difference. God always gives us freewill, He does not abdicate from that, but that does allow Him to be disappointed with us. If we continue in our sin and in our rebellion, disappointing God, He will finally reject us as well, as He did His people. But if we reach out to touch Him, connecting with Him, as He reaches out to us, we will find safety.

Old people often know about the safe harbour, for they enter their final port when they are frail and tired like a ship lowering the sails. They come into a secure place from the raging sea, and with a putting down of the anchor they find help and comfort readily available. It seems without the hustle and bustle of responsibilities in the daily life it is easier to be there with God. So it is for anyone who comes into that safety and lowers his own sail, leaving his/her difficulties with God.

So do overwhelming gifts and great blessings from God ensure there will be no suffering? No. **Without a secure relationship with God, riches will be as useless as the riches of the evil man.** They were useless for Solomon. Many kings emulated him, and they fell into great evil.



11. Different words from God about suffering - kings to the prophets

It is often a tragic dilemma, not getting what one wants, or getting what one wants! Solomon asked for wisdom and was commended of God for his choice, and received riches as well. The more he thought about all the gifts he had been given, many wives and concubines, a large palace, a well trained, best equipped, well provisioned army, many horses, a strong thriving economy, with excessive wealth and large symbols of power and status, the more he thought about himself as self made, and he moved away from God. The brief vision of a covenant and the promises that went with the implementation of his gifts from God became a careless light in an unsafe place. Destruction loomed, and God withdrew His sanction. The scale of the ruin of Solomon and his kingdom eclipsed the scale of the rise of the kingdom of that of his father David with so much promise. And so in the lives of the ensuing kings, then in their captivity, God turned from kings to prophets. But the prophets too, speaking and enacting the messages that God had given them, failed to rein in the evil that God's people determined to do. God seemed to draw further and further away from his people, as they made so little effort to fulfill His desires for them.

From Isaiah to Malachi there are seventeen books of the prophets. Each time, when the people's cry was delivered to God by the prophets, the prophets would bring back the answer. **Their continuing cry to God was a cry of disappointment** that He is seemingly is hidden, turning His face away, and uncaring of their troubles. **The answer from God that repentance would restore them with God**, came back through the prophets. **They never heard His searing reply.**

God was not silent, for surely it was true that He spoke through his prophets. It was no more drama of the supernatural kind, no more fire not burning in bushes, no more floods of water gushing from rocks, no more heavenly manna, and 40 year lasting sandals with a light in the sky to follow. It was more than that now. The miracles had not moved His people to obey Him, nor the prophets, so God's permanent record first preserved in fragments, and eventually brought together in one book, **the Bible, became His encouragement.** This permanent record eventually reached us. That record was preserved for us all and became His lasting record. It is worth saying that even when He sent His son, they did not recognize him. Peter brought the message that He condemned the "*willingly ignorant*", 2 Peter 2, who decried Him in word and deed. "*I have withdrawn my presence, my slowness to act is a sign of mercy to you, not slackness, though my judgments appear stern, I am suffering with you, repent at anytime, despite it all I will forgive you*".

God was condemned by those within and outside the covenant for being slack with Israel and their wickedness, despite His well known standard for them. Jeremiah 14:9, *“why should you be as a man, astonished who cannot save us”*. Simeon and Levi were condemned by Jacob on the occasion of the ruthless behaviour at Shechem, and later at Jacob’s death bed blessing. *“You have troubled me to make me to stink among the nations”*. It was not Jacob’s name so much which came into disrepute. It was God’s name, for He was known as the Saviour of the Jacob family. So God wished it known that it was not slackness, but mercy shown to His people over those long periods of slack time. 2 Peter 3:9 *“The Lord is not slack, as some men count slackness, but is longsuffering to us ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance”*. He was not silent to their sufferings, but His covenant included obedience.

In the face of such wickedness their God was viewed as merciful by the nations round about. But in the continuing display of evil practices, the perception of the onlookers changed. God’s mercy, with the seeming lack of punishment of the Israelites, made Him *“wearied”* by their sinful words. They made Him appear too longsuffering, like a God of Ridicule, Malachi 2:17. So *“God gave them over to their sins. I do not this for your sake but for mine. I will sanctify my name”*, Ezekiel 36:22. It began in Eden, with a highlight at Shechem, and ended with Paul’s message to the Gentiles. Here at last were some *“who were dead to trespasses and sins and were now quickened to receive the gospel”*. This mystery was revealed in Ephesians 2:1 and **now God used His son as a focus for penitence and restitution.**



12. Jesus' answers, about God's apparent silence, were still not enough

We could never risk criticizing God's stance on mercy and love and compassion and grace, for, in Jonah's time, it only took forty days for that terrible city of Nineveh to repent. We also hope for the happy ending like we know happens in fantasy. Hope is the saving of it all. **Not knowing what is in the future, listening to the messages from God, and pressing onward, brings on hope.**

The books of the prophets are all like that. They mostly end on a high note of the hoped for better things. There are terrible descriptions of evil and its consequence in their pages, pleadings for mercy, but there were too few able to repent and turn from the evil. **Each prophecy is enclosed at each end with hope, like an envelope encloses a message. It is like the whole of God's word, the Bible, which in turn begins in hope with a new Ideal Creation and ends in wonder of the new Kingdom Creation** and in between is the terrible record of human history together with the record of those who managed to be righteous through the turmoil. **The wonder, after the failure of the prophetic messages, was the advent of the Son of God.**

When the prophesies ceased, the Israelites were divided, seemingly without hope, and taken off in captivity to one or the other of their conquering nations. Each time it happened they were a bad example of God's provision and useless as a prominent people exhibiting the works of God. They were so deficient in showing His loving face to skeptical neighbors that they became like dross to be disposed of in the rubbish bin. There was no Joseph, no Moses, no Joshua, no Samuel, no righteous kings or prophets to deliver them. Worst of all, their worshipping structures were in rubble piles. That brought shame on themselves, and disrepute on the name of God.

Four centuries of God's silence seemed to be a reoccurring Divine indifference, first when the Israelites lived in Egypt, after Joseph and before Moses, and then after the prophets and before the appearance of Jesus Christ. **These two long silences might mean that a few righteous people's longing for a divine intervention became a catalyst for God's looking again at His people from His turned away face and apparent silence.** The Jews, when only Judah was left, knew to watch for a Messiah, and so the waiting took on hope again. These few righteous who looked for the Son of God became the catalyst. Still, after the prophets, and after God's long silence, with the first advent of His son, the complaints of the disappointment with God, the hiddenness of God and the

silence of God continued as before, and contributed again to the questions of unfairness.

God was not silent in that here was His Son made in His image. Anyone who asked Jesus questions was answered without pomp or ceremony, with no smoke, no fire, no thundering, no lightening. He reassured his listeners, *“anyone who has seen me has seen the Father”*. Even his family said *“he is out of his mind.”* As they viewed him, He was not like a King, or a Saviour.

And as well, in the expectation of the critical others, Jesus was not attuned to the welfare of his followers and in that, it seemed, he was *“not fair.”* He did not take away all sickness or death. Some were revived and some healed, but not all of them. The prophets had promised relief from illness and death if the Jews repented, but Jesus did not *“wipe away all tears from their eyes”*. *“Which is easier to say ‘Your sins are forgiven, or to say get up and walk?’”* They felt **his stories of the kingdom left much to be desired, for it never was just around the corner, and his teachings revolved more around God’s forgiveness of sins than healing of bodies and performing spectacular miracles of saving people from stonings or death or crucifixion.**

So, sins forgiven take the leading role in this preparation for the Kingdom, rather than spectacular healings that would have really impressed the crowds. Who can tell about sins forgiven or not? Only God knows that. But the people could tell if more lame men walked and more blind men saw. So they required more evidence for their own eyes. They lacked in hope and faith and wanted only the present to be relieved. **In their misunderstanding they suffered faithlessness.**



13. Was the mission of the son of God perceived as a failure?

Jesus failed to measure up to the expectations of the Jews and so pride, hypocrisy and legalism continued to thrive amongst the Pharisees. Jesus told his captors that his *“kingdom was not of this world”* when they chided him for being powerless and ineffective. He said, ***“My kingdom is from another place”***. **That hardly inspired confidence in any of the doubters, and so in their confusion and misunderstanding, the leaders placed a thorn crown upon his head and nailed him to the cross. In his agony his purple robe was covered in blood and dust, but they were scornful and laughing and teased him and then they crucified him.**

God had wanted a response of reception and love for His son, not a response to miracles and power displays. Jesus evaded those expectations by limiting the displays and he downplayed the miracles. *“Tell no one”*, he said. We know the miracles and power did not work in the OT, when there were many opportunities and abundant displays for his children to see His care and love. God knew those manifestations would not work again in the long term, but the people still craved them again. **God also knew that His powerful miracles did not foster faith in the faithless. So He used the miracles only to reinforce the faith in the already faithful.**

The Transfiguration with Jesus’ dazzling appearance, with his robe shining white as snow, in the presence of Elijah and Moses, did not confirm any long lasting faith in even his disciples, Peter James and John. He said, *“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death”*. Matthew 26:38, and it was, as he agonized with his Father, that they slept and *“could not watch with him one hour”*. So a big display then did not even now confirm lasting faith in his disciples. God already knew that what He wanted from the people could not be won over using power displays.

Jesus prayed, *“Thy will be done”*. He died and was taken to his grave, without calling down any legions of angels. God did what He said He would do, without summoning His power to save His son. The life and death of His son became history and then evil took over once more from righteousness. This son of God died in a terrible crucifixion and immediately God’s creation seemed to reply to that evil. The ground shook, and the tombs cracked open, former dead people wandered around, the sun hid, the sky went black. Then the Temple curtain ripped from top to bottom. Significantly **the Most Holy Place was now open, so every man could walk with God.**

When there was no answer from God to the forsaken cry of His son, with no rescue effort to save His son, this seemingly silent Father disappointed those around the cross who misunderstood Christ's mission. **God's non intervention at the cross brought a terrible grief to his disciples and the believers became a laughing stock. That death still causes mockery even today.**

God did not intervene, but in that non intervention He made an access to Himself in the Most Holy Place, for all of us who would also take up our cross. He showed that it was a greater love that the son laid down his life for those he loved. The end Kingdom, where righteousness will be again, required this apparent silence of God. "*He saved others, himself he cannot save*", they mocked. How could this man hanging on the cross have ever cried, "*I have overcome the world*"?

If some saw the cross as a failure, God did not, for it was all in His fore knowledge. He meant it to pave the way for us to likewise suffer, even unto death, and so have our path laid out to His door. "*I am the Way*" Jesus said.

But others might say in their misunderstanding -

- * Why do wicked people flourish and evil generations prosper?
- * Why is there poverty and depravity, where people make riches and evil the gods of their lives?
- * Why is there no answer when we plead for God to come down, to send His son, and still justice does not prevail?

Because that is the Way of God for now.



14. What did the terrible crucifixion do for us in our suffering?

Jesus, the son of God, made it possible for us to walk intimately with God. That was not possible until that son paved the Way. We now have an ability to make a close relationship to the Father. God had tried it before, but that had seemed impossible with a nation. The curtain in the Temple had made a division between God and the people, and now, broken down, it revealed a God who needed not the national obedience, but the obedience of each individual who would approach Him. **No one previously could touch the representing articles of God, like the ark. No one had seen God face to face because of His seeming remoteness there. They did not hold Him in any intimacy, until He sent His son, Jesus, who came to heal and to raise hope again.**

Jesus' own response to his suffering was one of tears, crying to God to remove the cup. After this, the despair of others fades significantly - Job's despair, the anguish in Lamentations, the pleading by the prophets for the nation's healing. **But then Jesus said, "Thy will be done". So the son provided a new way of holding things together, healing the sinner's alienation from God and restoring those who failed, opening the Godly relationship again.** It was Jesus Christ the son of God, the suffering servant, the forsaken one, the crucified one who understood the struggles of everyman, who provided this new way, and when he rose from the tomb where they had laid him, on the third day, their faith was made whole and they believed. To this day, we make remember him with our memorial celebrations. And then **the wonderful promise that this wounded, dead, and then risen Lord made, was that he would return after his ascension to fulfill all righteousness and be a king at last.**

The trials and torments go on, for millennia, and still saints live under the promise of his return. That he has not yet returned, feeds the disappointment, the same long apparent silence of God, the same Face seemingly hidden from those who love Him. But hope over rides the feelings we have of abandonment with the questions that the world is unfair, that evil thrives and is not quenched, and that so much goodness is apparently unseen. God might have promised to put everything under the feet of Jesus, "*Yet we do not see everything subject to him*", Hebrews 2. **Do we, as well, really believe that good triumphing over evil will ever happen? We do in hope.**

If Jesus had not suffered, but rather used his power to disable his enemies, he could not be now one of us. He would have failed in his mission to be one with us, to redeem us. Somehow, someday God needed to provide a means by which we can return to the purity we were at the Creation, before the freewill He had given us led us to the Fall. And He did. We too can now identify

intimately with God through the sufferings of His son. Not only does God know about our pain, but because we now know God intimately, He shares in our pain. **God has a concern with His love for us for He hates the evil that we do, but He mercifully forgives us.**

God loved His people and wanted them to strive for goodness, but the evil that reigned within their hearts which produced the evil deeds, disappointed Him and quenched His love for them. . **So He sent His son to soak up evil deeds. It happens for us, like when the stab is made, or when the spear is thrown into our heart. So we now know that evil can be absorbed in those who love Him. Evil can be transformed into goodness and love. When the evil is all soaked up, asking for blessings on the evil one, might also just turn away the evil intent.**

“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” Forty days the risen Lord had walked the earth in his resurrected self and able now to convince some of the deniers and the doubters. Surely now was the time to overcome the Romans and bring in the longed for Kingdom? But one day he rose in the air and was never seen again on the earth.

Only then did they understand that he had come not only to show them, and future believers, how to deal with injustice, but to show us all what God is like. He gave us all instructions in how to grow a church full of believers as a new dwelling place for God, where he is head, and where every heart breathes in faith about him. Is that enough for us?



15. How did God instruct the people now about joy and suffering?

Christ endorsed his disciples with the Spirit of the Father, and they multiplied more disciples for the Father. He anointed those with the same Spirit of God, and sent them out to places where he had never been. He sent them to the ends of the earth. They grew more places for the Father. He was present in the most awkward, the most evil, the most unlovely, the most dangerous and the most unlikely places. He is there still, and we see Him in the face of His church. **The temple is no longer a structure of bricks and mortar**, like Solomon's Temple or Herod's Temple. **It moved in the first century into "the body of Christ"**. Paul reminds us, *"don't you know, that you yourself are God's Temple, and that God's Spirit lives in you?"* 1Corinthians 3:16. It is impossible now to destroy this edifice which God has set up for we are not our own. *"Destroy it, and I will raise it up in three days"*.

If we are of God, He requires us to do His work. He can do it perfectly, of course, if He wants, but He asks us to do His work, because He wants us to learn more about Him. What better way to learn about him, than to do His work. *"The foolishness of God is wiser than men"*, yet **He accepts the frail, inadequate worker who with his/her free will, makes wrong choices and foolish decisions. Even in all our inadequacies, He asks us to represent Him upon the earth to lead people to righteousness.** What other employer would do that?

Paul equates our misguided tendencies with prostitution, and asks, *"Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with prostitutes?"* 1 Corinthians 6:15. He does not want us be ambivalent about evil around us. We cannot, with any conscience, just leave problems up to God to solve. He requires some effort on our behalf. We need to see His will, and let Him work through us, *"Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God, who works in you"*.

As Saul went about persecuting Christians, it was Jesus he persecuted, as Jesus told him on the Damascus Road, Jesus' own body was in those Christians. It is Jesus in them/us who work the works of faith. **Hurt those who Jesus loves, and hurt Jesus. Support those who Jesus loves, and we support Jesus. Be one who Jesus loves, and others will see Jesus. Work in the church for their salvation and it is a work of God.** That is why Saul became Paul and never forgot the lesson that those Christians he persecuted were Christ ones, and that he was persecuting Christ, in persecuting Christians. **The responsibility is awesome, that if God does a work in us, and that if He is present with His son in our lives, then others may see Him and know Him and understand.**

If we do not struggle to be like Him, then we might deceive others, and we might deceive ourselves, but of course we will never deceive Him. We, with our freewill and wayward ways are the greatest cost and disappointment to God. **When outsiders look at the flawed humans who represent God, they are disillusioned with God, and cannot see His face.** God does not need us to fulfill His purpose, but He does want us to be with Him, and offers us the way to be part of His plan, to be “*members of his household*”, brought near from “*faraway places*”, in “*a dwelling in which God lives by His spirit*”. But He does not need us. God is not now in His tabernacle tent, or the Temple of stone, but He will be in us if we invite Him.

It is the manifold wisdom of God, the divine manifestation that is now manifested in each one of His people. They in turn dwell in Him, and that is how we are His Temple.

There is no doubt there is no risk for the ungodly, for without any faith they are never confronted with any disappointment with God. They are safe in their ignorance and will pass away. The ignorant is sure in his mind where he is in the scheme of things. If we keep in sin and evil, we risk God’s allegiance to us. We can, with His gift of freewill, at anytime remove ourselves from Him. However He keeps on trying with us, giving us opportunities to make way for Him. **The risk to the believer is to bear the hurts, the tragedies, the disappointments and the flawed responses to any goodness in life, and then think that God is apparently hidden, and silent and not even listening. That hopeless burden bearing leaves us impotent if we think that.**



16. Our righteous response to God is His reward

We might align ourselves with a religious faith, but that does not guarantee our life in Him. A set of doctrines do not a life in Christ make. There has to be an individual commitment, not a group commitment. **That individual commitment should remain paramount throughout our life, and no religious sect on earth can change that. We need the sect for social life in Christ, for our spiritual encouragement and for our education in Biblical matters, and for the encouragement of each other in worship. But that will not guarantee our Kingdom place.**

Conversely, if we, still believing, but disappointingly leave membership of a religious sect, that does not mean we have left His truth. It is His truth, we do not own it, and we cannot consider who is in God's Truth, and who is not in that Truth. We can decide who is in, or not in our truth or religious sect, if we belong to such a group, but we cannot reject a believer from God's Truth. The "Basics for Christian Living" is the faith statement for a life in Christ, the "so that I will" of doctrine.

Endurance of the difficulties is not just the ability to bear hard things that the Lord lays upon us, but the ability to turn them into the glory of God. Here is a difficulty for us, for it seems God expects more of us than bearing burdens. **He expects us to bear the burdens that appear too hard for us to bear, and He says, "I am here". That reassurance means that we can feel safe from our difficulties under His care.** God may not answer our importuning as we wish, and it is often as if He does not hear, or is silent, or that He has turned His face away. But when all is said and done, **in the dark hours of the night when there is no release from the pit, and the light eludes us, and we are howling with a terrible grief of rejection, He whispers, "I am here with you." And that is, after all, enough.** It is His *"hiding place where He will preserve us, and where we are compassed about with songs of deliverance"*, Psalm 32, from the reviling of men, their accusations and exclusions. It is the place of *"binding up the brokenhearted"*.

So it is not where God is when we are hurting so much, but where are we when we hurt?

Job (7:17-18) groaned from where he was, scared with dreams, and terrified with visions, and would choose strangling or death rather than speak with God, (for he knows he has come short of God's standard). At first he cries out in frustration for God to leave him alone.

"Where is man that you make so much of him,

*that you give him so much attention,
that you examine him in the morning
and test him at every moment?
Will you never look away from me,
or let me alone for an instant?"*

The accusers and the comforters argue with Job (35) that he has sinned and that he is so insignificant in the eyes of God that whatever Job would do, he will not be noticed or have any effect on the universe. However, the continuing recorded argument of Job, where Job defends his position, eventually demonstrates his unity with God, when God endorses Job. We would acknowledge that there are five persons here, with Job at centre stage.

"If you sin, how does that affect God?" ... "If your sins are many, what does that do to Him?" ...

"If you are righteous, what does that do to Him?" ... "Or what does He receive from your hand?" ...

"Your wickedness affects only a man like yourself and your righteousness only the sons of men."

But Elihu was wrong, for one person does make a difference, the faith of a single man counts very much. Our response to God's testing matters very much to Him. Job's individual response was God's reward and, as well, a blessing for Job. Our individual response to God can also be a double blessing. For He said, Proverbs 25:2, that He would conceal matters so that we would have a joy in searching it out. So the finding of it is joy.



17. God's measure is not our measure

Goodness was in God's creation plan before sin, so in the struggle for a righteous life it is a matter of reaching back to the prime state of Creation. God had given the instruction to the man and woman, "*Do not eat ...*".and **when they disobeyed, sin entered in.** That state is rightly called "The Fall". When sin entered into the life of men and women, God introduced a pathway back to His righteousness, and this encouraged those men and women to make a struggle against evil. However even His own people, the Israelites, saw no connection between their suffering at the hands of their enemies and their disobedience of God's commands. We may be no different! God did make it attractive for those seeking Him to choose goodness. Rather than walk with no commitment, without hope and no expectation, culminating in oblivion at the end of our lives, **those who seek God would rather walk in this world, supported by God, by participating in a baptismal commitment to Him, with the hope of better things to come.**

To us, life often seems unfair and difficult. Job, without his children or his wealth, sitting naked on a pile of ashes, in so much tragedy, argues with his friends that he has done nothing unforgivable, and that God is not fair. Even Job's wife encourages Job to "*curse God and die*".

But if we acknowledge that it is His measure, then He decides how we arrive at our despair place. We cannot expect Him to use our standard or measure of fairness. However, we are reassured that He will comfort us in our confusion, when He uses His measure.

We do not imagine that God can do nothing about unfairness, or about those who beset us, or that He finds difficulty in keeping the chaos in check. We do not believe that He requires us to live our lives precisely, where we react with measured mathematical like precision, before justice can prevail. We cannot guarantee that if we pray hard enough God will yield to our desire. God did not ever promise that good people will thrive with health and prosperity, and that evil people will fail.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

The answer to all those discussion questions is that **God is trying to teach us something, other than what we think might be on His agenda.** To begin with

we can always help the man with no feet, when we at least can cover ours. That need in itself creates an opportunity which we should not forfeit, as we demonstrate our beliefs to the unbeliever. And, yes, God will not test us beyond what we can stand, and justice is in God's hand. But they are all answers only partly right.

The answer also is that God is frustrated and grieved that when He leaves unbelieving men to their own devices, often bad things happen to good people. And He is disappointed with the vicissitudes of life when His children are in trouble and pain of their own doing. God declined to answer Gideon's "why" questions, Judges 6:13, nor did He answer Job's questions. That is because goodness does not preclude suffering, trouble and pain for good people?

So God promises to be in the hurting with us, when it hurts. If we have that good relationship with God through all our life, then when it hurts we can fall back on that. He understands our howling in the night and wallowing in the mud, **He understands our deep dark pit, for He is there also.** He encourages us that physical realities in our lives are nothing to do with our spiritual journey. **Terrible physical realities, like the crucifixion, might present God as the enemy. If we agree we will find it difficult to deny an alienation from God. Others view the life and death of the Son of God as an essential to teach the sacrificial element of suffering for us to copy so others can see, and also suffer willingly for His sake. True accepted Biblical saints did not think of God as the enemy, criticizing Him, for they knew His measure. So when we are not relieved of our ongoing suffering, for His sake, we ourselves would not criticize Him.**



18. Love God and be content with the “no” answer to our suffering

“Earth’s afire with heaven and every common bush afire with God, but only he sees who takes off his shoes, the rest ... see only evil.

Men dance in tune with the Lord, but if there are those who cannot hear the music, they perceive the dancers as mad ... and complain about the dance”, bringing in resources to forbid it. This unknown author pens what we know happens in constricted environments. They see change and are afraid.

So the tormenters in our life on earth make it grossly unfair. The sinless Christ found that out. But he also found a God of sacrificial love. **No one is exempt from tragedy or disappointment.** And if we stake our life on justice and a fault proof life, with every contingency considered, and every escape route covered, then we set ourselves for a loss of faith.

In any case, if miracles do happen and people are revived from imminent destruction, those miracles do not prevent their eventual death. Sure, out of darkness, and from the unfairness and unrighteousness, a bright light can shine, like the miracle of the resurrection morn for Jesus Christ. **The cross overcame evil, and gave us a way to relate to righteousness, but the cross did not take away unfairness and unrighteousness**, and so we need our resurrection morn as well. That requires a new heaven and a new earth for which in expectation we pray.

“To love God”, the first commandment, requires that we love Him, not only in the good times but in the difficult times as well, even in the terrors and tragedies and the fear and the loneliness and the persecutions, when we are in the wilderness of life. **He does ask us to run with broken legs, or sing when our throat is dry, to pray when the words cannot come, to sit on an ash hill, and argue with tormentors who take wrongful points of view. He does expect us to ask for blessing upon detractors. For hurting hearts that is a very hard task, but blessings on detractors, bring blessings back to us. That’s God’s goodwill revolving around about us.**

We might doubt our value to God when our tormentors taunt us with *“Do you think God cares about someone like you?”*, *“Do you think the Maker of the Universe would ever drop down to speak with you?”*, *“Does He need to explain Himself to you?”*, *“We have God’s mind on Truth, and we know that He does not want you”*. That’s when the little spark in the cloud comes by and God reaches down and speaks to reassure us, and asks us to bless the tormentors.

Here in four chapters, (Job 38-41) is God's defense of the charge of His role being unfair and disappointing. It is not an acknowledgement of the unfair, and "over the top pain" we feel over our trials, or even an understanding of our disappointments. **It is a lesson given by God in how He manages the physical universe, and how Job cannot do that, and how we cannot do that.**

By implication then it also means Job cannot manage the moral universe either. So we get our lesson as well, that we also are unable to manage the moral universe. Job repents in dust and ashes and every trace of thinking God unfair, and any disappointment with God, vanishes. God asks us in the lesson of Job, to do likewise.

But we are not told the full answer, still. God declined to answer specifically as Job had asked, and the friends and comforters withdrew themselves with their mistaken ideas and pompous speeches, and Job himself withdrew His questions. Then it was that God vindicated Job.

If we can also cast ourselves upon the Lord even when we do not know all the answers, He will vindicate us as well, at a time when He deems it is right. As Job eventually accepted the ways of the Lord, withdrawing his questions, we also, not fully understanding the way of the Lord, nor His measure, can trust in Him to do it right, without question. Then we will be able to accept the "no" answer with better equanimity, and therewith be content.



19. Are we satisfied with God's answer about suffering?

Any explanation of our suffering would not satisfy our relentless questioning of why this or that happens. We hear it around us, and we hear it in our own heads. We place our lives in His hands at baptism, yet **there is still no plausible knowledge in our spiritual experiences in Christ or even in our logical stance of fairness that would allow us to understand all His ways.**

So God does not try us with answers too hard for us. God Himself does not give us an answer. He supports us in the suffering but the suffering itself is too hard for us to understand. If we attempt to answer there are too many inconsistencies that do not follow our pattern of logic. When God stepped into my life, into my time, then I perceive, in my understanding that God has to exist by my rules. Not so. He steps in and out of time as I know it, so I cannot comprehend it.

Is man even capable of understanding how God works his physical and moral world? No.

Can man understand the greatness of God, the creation by God, His omnipotence over the universe, over all of the heavens as we now know we are part of? No.

Can man understand the time from before time and into future time? No.

Can we, who live in the present, and remember the past, and wonder about the future, ever understand the whole picture of what He surveys and controls? No.

When we say God is in control, we have to cast our minds into an unknown infinity with a unexplainable time frame, which does not resemble anything that we are familiar with. We are in the realms of impossibility for our finite minds cannot comprehend it. We cannot understand sound and colour if we are born deaf and blind. So then Job's questions, and our questions of the same measure, belong to another place rather than our customary place. It is a higher point of view, a more complex and unseen place, beyond our comprehension, and a place forbidden to us yet. So the answers to those questions and the answers about space and time, belong to God who formed them. We can partially understand them but He can move about in them, we cannot. He looks at the whole of history and the present and on into the future. He talks to us about them, for he says "*one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day*", but He cannot explain them to us. He talks about eternity but in our finiteness, we cannot understand the infiniteness of eternity.

Understanding God's truth of eternity is far above us, but in His graciousness He comes to us and allows us to exist in a time and space, which is only a small part of His time and space, a place which we can

understand, but still an overall unseen place. That is why we are limited in our understanding of suffering.

We look at the past, the present and the future in a sequential series of frames, one after the other. God sees the whole collection at once from above in a great pattern of His creation. Perhaps some of us can better understand the view from above than others can, but no one can understand the ultimate details of the view.

God told Moses to record the creation in different styles, and gave us different measures of understanding of His creation. God gave Job as much as He considered Job could comprehend, about that same creation. Job was honoured with that gift of explanation, and then barely comprehending, was at last content with God's stated position that Job's rules could not apply to God. Now Job understood God's request that he could leave the rest to Him.

Theologians have debated, without much success or understanding, the different positions of foreknowledge and predestination and things that we cannot foresee. In another life we may understand these puzzles but for now because we do not have that skill, we are entrapped in our time, where space and time and the other mysteries are not revealed to us and we cannot foresee. Our perception is warped, but we may not call God unfair. **We do not understand the success of evil, the unfair events, or the sadness that overcomes us, and when so often righteousness is overcome with unrighteousness.** So we remain unsatisfied, yet trusting Him.



20. We are incomplete without the mind of God in suffering

When God took Abraham out to see the stars like the sand of the seashore, and again when He reassured him after the near sacrifice, God was showing him the transcendent, trying to help his understanding of eternity and the blessings that awaited him there. That is also the message of Job, when the relationship between God and Job was tested to the limit, before Job regained his blessings.

If we are His, as Abraham was, God tells us that that He himself suffers with us in it, in all the uncertainty, the longing and the pain and the loss and the loss, and even in our deaths, with the promises never fulfilled. Then if we accept that, God learns whether we are still clay and serve another god, or whether we are truly a light in His image and are truly His. If we are truly His, behold we are His servants and are pleased to do His will. **He holds the measure, and He has spared us to recover the means to reflect His purpose. He needs us to be satisfied that at present we cannot grasp that and that it is later that we receive the blessings and promises fulfilled.** And what does He say encouragingly and reassuringly? *“The word is near you, in your mouth, and in your heart”*.

When that suffering servant, Job, under terrible siege, hears God’s message in the whirlwind,

“Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?”

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?”

“Have the gates of death been opened unto thee?”

“Or hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death?”

“Declare if thou knowest it all ...”

Job then knows that he knows not about any of that.

So God tells us that our knowledge is incomplete, but He encourages us in the idea that science is important, and He allows, even encourages, us to be as close as we can to understanding that, but our understanding will always be incomplete and limited. **But to forget the limits where God has placed us is dangerous. Our personal existence or the creation of our earth, or the far flung universe will never be fully understood by us, and is completely beyond our grasp. So is the search by man himself sufficient meaning for man’s existence? Yes, for it is God who allows that and it is He who sets the limit.**

“Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, O LORD, They rejoice in your name all the day long; they exalt in your righteousness”.

The imbalance in the world is also beyond our grasp. There is no seeming connection between virtue and reward and there is no seeming connection between evil and punishment in this world of ours. The randomness of violence and goodness does not seem to instruct us well. We are puzzled by all the philosophical problems that this seeming imbalance bring to mind, unless we realize that God lays the matting beneath our feet, and often with an unexpected layer. He has assured us often. He is there with us in the most terrible tribulation, to lift us up and to mould us from clay into a shining light for Him, but He still holds the measure of good and evil, reward and punishment. **We cannot read or gauge those measures.**

What we cannot grasp must not add to our confusion. It must tell us that God is in charge of time and space and all the supposed anomalies, and the seeming imbalance, and so we hold on. **If we feel all knowing and wise, then there is no need for God in our lives. Conversely the more we realize that we do not know, and that we lack wisdom, the more we can bring ourselves, in our incompleteness, to His feet and say “take me” for in my flesh I am nothing. Then our perception and our insight and extraordinary understanding and all His gifts will be enhanced by Him, as we also ask Him to make us wise.**



21. We are surprised by time in our joys and our sufferings

It is said that Christ “*was chosen before the foundation of the world*”, and “*eternal purpose and grace were given us in Christ Jesus, before the beginning of time*”. 1 Peter 1:20, 2 Timothy 1:9. **Our minds cannot fathom “before the beginning of time” - before Adam, before The Fall. But God knew there would be a need for redemption well before His creation, before this earth existed. So God did not hastily think up contingency plan when sin came in.**

We understand eternity as a continuing of our time, and we can learn about that. We know that God does not enjoy keeping us in the dark about His future with no facilities or faculties to see the bright eternal light ahead, but He does recognize our limitations. We only see in the glass darkly. We are time bound, and will only make sense of the overall picture when our bodies are changed, when history has run its course. **“All things work together for good”, is only true from the big picture for everything does not now work together for good. From the small picture of our time bound lives, good things are not working together and producing more goodness, for we see goodness assailed on every hand by evil. The teaching, Romans 8:28, is a comfort for us now, but the earnest is in the future, for we realize that then we will not be running about in chaos in this world. We do know that now Someone is guiding us toward that order of goodness and eternity, when all things will work together for good.** Isaiah in 7:14 and 8:10 explains to us that He will be with us in His son. “*Immanuel*”, or “*God with us*”, until that day when He “*shall quicken mortal bodies*”, *by his Spirit which dwelleth in you*”. Romans 8:11.

Why are we constantly surprised by time? It goes slowly as we wait out an evil torment. Nothing seems to change and our lives are twisted like the tortured willow vine. Or it “*goes quickly*”, we say, when we know it does not. We marvel at growth. “*That’s grown quickly*” we say, or “*look how she’s grown*”. So our present measurement of time still puzzles us. We have either a paucity of time, or plenty of it, but that is our reflection on it, and experience of it, not the quality or quantity of time itself. Time remains constant and measured and never changing. No one can put into words how and why our perception of time changes, from when we are young to when we are older. It is a self experience and no one else’s. Perceptions continue to change, either by surprising jolts over the experiences in our lives, or gradually, as we age when life teaches us more gentle lessons. **Time is flexible in our minds, but inevitably more precious as we age.**

When doubts do set in, and we feel faith failing us, it is not wise to bury those feelings under a mountain of work, or some other distraction, because denial does not help the wound to heal. We need to speak of our need, so with the compassion of others, and with the reflection of His face in their care, we can regain our own insight. Then when we are healed we know how to imitate that, casting the lifeline further on to those who are now doubtful and needing their faith fertilized. There is an old Arab saying which observes how “*we sprinkle sugar over death*”. As we kiss the hurt of a child “*to make it better*”, so we seek to sweeten the tragedy for those in the sour of grief, helping to fill the raw void with good things towards a recovery for those who are grief stricken.

Job, Abraham, Joseph, David, all had divine communication from God and then with His seeming silence they worked through the testing times. We are told about the end of some faith people in Hebrews 11, for example “stoned” and “sawn asunder”. It seems that they hung on to the divine connection with the promises until they died, even though it might seem to us that He might have abandoned them. They seemed to get their strength from the unseen world and regarded it as solid as the visible world which often seemed to be caving in around them. “*The world was not worthy of them*” and “*God is not ashamed to be called their God*”. **There are bewildering times for all His saints, when God seems silent. But when there are doubts, then faith slips in. So if there were not the doubting times, then the faith times could not slip in, to give faithfulness time to prevail, and be fertilized and grow and expand and become part of our being. Therein is the joy of it, when we thought there was no joy. Our freely offered faith is now a joy reflected back to Him.**



22. Miracles in our time of suffering

Other people's miracles do not persuade us to have faith, other people's miracles work only for those other people. Our own miracles will help our faith, but even that is not true faithfulness, for no tangible thing will encourage us to have faith through the time of unanswered prayers and through the disappointment at the absence of the miracle. There has to be more than that sort of faith, for it is a hang on "*at any cost*" faith, in the face of seemingly unanswered prayers.

Psalm 23 models the childlike faith of answered prayer where comfort abounds for those who love the Lord. This is a time of unusual closeness to God in an extremity. **But Psalm 22 models the faithful, yet unanswered prayer of those who are comfortless, loving the Lord in an unlovely place.** It is a confusing life pattern of torment and pain, when the Lord seems far away, apparently silent, with His face turned away, hidden. The immature idea we had that God always answers prayer as we have asked, has failed, and His promises and reassurance seem utterly false in the silence.

God, it seems, wants us to fertilize our faith in the dark times and that down time is where it truly flourishes. We are strengthened by our reaching out from the pit, and nourished in our stretching to find Him there, feeling for Him when He is seemingly not there. It is as if we need unsolvable problems, terrible uncertainty and a searching in the dark, to grow firmer faith. We are ever striving, stretching and working to reach Him, praying without ceasing for our desires, and finding him seemingly absent. **It is all for our sake, but it is a hard way to grow faith. Still, it is the faith that cannot be shaken, because it has already been tested in the shaking.**

It is true that we do enjoy miracles, but as our faith matures they seem to become less frequent. In this we are reminded of the cup that was not taken from the Son, nor the thorn from the ageing Paul. Is it that as we gain more faith we receive less encouragement from God? Is it that He knows us well, and knows that we will stay there with Him? Those embarking on the journey need courage to stay on track. Those already in the Way, are in Him in the Truth, and with their life in the Life, held in His hand. **Faith is toughened by testing, and to God our freely offered faith expressed in love for Him is more precious than we can imagine.** The prophets expressed God's love and longings for His people and so we know how He appreciates our love for Him. "*When the son of Man comes will he find faith in the earth?*"

God sent His son and other blessings to us as well, to encourage good and to discourage evil, with the weapon of faith. We see the darkest side of life and the deepest trials without God's response to our call. We can be like accusing Job, or like doubting Thomas, or accepting like that son of His, and we can still believe. Because of His son's death, God knows how tragedy feels. And it was then and now to that son that the NT writers keep directing us. **May we also as converts follow the focus on the cross, and then focus on the hope of our resurrection.**

When God seems absent He may be closest of all. When Jesus died, and God seemed also dead as well, and disappointment set in, there was that son alive again. Yes, "*Sunday comes after Friday*". "*He is risen, he is risen*". **So tragedy, darkness and then triumph seem to be the pattern, if only we can move through the darkness in the pit, to the triumph.** He too is "*acquainted with grief*", and it was Psalm 22 that he quoted. But it is with patience we wait through the things we might not expect, trouble and hardship lies about us, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and sword, yet in all things we are more than conquerors. "*All things work together for good*", is the best miracle. Everything difficult indicates something with which we are not equipped to deal with, like we need to learn a new skill. So, if suffering is not overwhelming us, it may be that we have learned the lesson of suffering, through those unexpected terrors.

John Donne's Hymn of Christ "*Though thou with clouds of anger do disguise thy face; yet through that mask, I know those eyes, which, though they turn away sometimes, they never will despise.*



23. We are surprised by any joy found in suffering

As science moves forward more of our questions are answered. We have become so used to having our every inquiry answered with the flick of a finger on a keyboard. **Questions about the natural are more easily answered these days, but the spiritual questions are never answered, because we are finite.** In these two different spheres of knowledge, we are allowed into the natural sphere where we can understand the physical world in a limited and finite fashion. But we want that same sort of privilege for the supernatural sphere as well. We want proof of how things work in the super world, the spiritual world. But there is no proof in the supernatural, no logic, no understanding like in the natural. When we are converted and baptised we become part of the spiritual supernatural as well. We are buoyed up and enthused by our relationship with God. We speak to Him as we might speak to our father in the natural world, depending more and more on Him. Yet, when we move into the higher supernatural realm, we express ourselves in the lower natural realm, because we know no other. That's how He made us, and He understands.

Christ brought the two worlds together. The “*word became flesh*”, and then we could also be like Christ Jesus, truly in Him. He, the Supernatural, dwells in us, in our natural body. In that way, the seen world then is part of the unseen world, when God abides in our natural body. We are made in “*the image of God.*” We bear that image, and He enhances that image with His gifts. He decided before His creation that any supernatural risk was worth the scoffing of the unbelievers that He knew would be present. So “*He descended... with gifts*”, loving gifts for us.

CS Lewis said suffering and grief is God's hiddenness, like a closed door, locked and bolted with, it seems, no one at home. Everyone, sooner or later, is confronted by it. Those doubts and fears are all valid responses, and in anticipating our disappointments, God includes those responses in the Scriptural record of Psalm 22. It seems God understands the cost of maintaining faith in us, and so He gives us the wherewithal to counteract our faithlessness. When Job said, Job 10:20, “*look away from me, let me alone that I may take comfort a little ... in the shadow of death*”, he was grieving about the witnesses who judged him, and in his appeal to God he cried to his tormentors, 12: 2 and 13, “*No doubt you are the people and wisdom shall die with you. But I have understanding ... I am not inferior to you... Only with him (God) is wisdom and strength, he hath counsel and understanding*”. We also can cry the same way about those who tell lies of us, and He reassures us that He will hear the falsehoods, and our cries. He will be with us in our “*dark night of the soul*” for He has promised. He has not abandoned the affliction of the afflicted.

There is another lesson in Job that we can throw anything at God, our anger and our bold insults and He will absorb it all and still support us. Even using unnecessary insurance, like Jacob, in terrible fear, approaching his first meeting with Esau after Haran, He will support us. Wrestling had been a big part of Jacob's life strategy, and here in his terrible anxiety, Jacob wrestles with God, and he learns the mighty Peniel lesson. He now knows that God is there in the crisis, and so this crisis becomes a turning point in his life. Jacob, now disabled, could no longer wrestle anyone. Psalm 22:14, also assures us that God is there for us when "*our bones are out of joint*".

The Jacob story deserves its place in *Scripture* because it is about life and death, and struggle and recognition of sin, and confession and forgiveness, and going forward in faith. These Old Testament stories are about the ultimate questions, they are concerned much less with men and women, but rather with the lessons of God for them, and Him superintending it all. He really is the subject, the inner core, the maintaining factor. People are never important for their own sakes, or for their contributing work's sake, but always as objects of the divine momentum within their lifelong stories. Whether they affirm or deny Him, He is always the inner and most important story. It is His mission that is important, and men and women can be part of that, only if they wish to show by their commitment and their lives, that they are friends of God. That puts His glory on show as His mission mandate is being fulfilled. Looking back, then, there is joy in the suffering.



24. Memories are important in suffering

Our memories, our Bible verses, our prayers all seem impotent in the suffering which we endure, and because God understands, He will accept any response from us at the time and will deal with that. He will even accept that our memories are often not good for us as they spew out terrible thoughts of awful past situations, and the anticipation of more persecution. He can gradually work us back into the positive position and He supports us in the change. But He will not accept our ignoring of Him. None of His saints ignored God in their extremity, not Job, not Abraham, not Jacob, not Joseph, not David, not John, not Stephen. **God’s “hiddenness” does not mean that God is the enemy, or has a lack of concern for us. God permits us to have that feeling to work through, but not to take the clear assumption that He is hidden from us as an enemy.**

So there are two positions which God does not allow us. One, we must not ignore Him, and two, we must not think, because He is silent, that He is an enemy.

Job did not accuse God, in his understandably limited range of vision, of causing his problems. He asked God for explanations to solve the problems that he faced, because he could not satisfactorily answer his accusers. We have read that God did help him with the answers. We can safely assume that God will help us with answers for our suffering and pain in our overly sensitive state, and in our understandably limited range of vision, if we ask Him. Job learned about seeing the big picture, and then felt vindicated and loved by God, as Jacob did. God gave them loving expressions to help them feel secure in the present, and in any future trauma. God seeks us out but not to devour us in His anger, Job 10, 16. He gives us understanding, gently leading us back.

God does permit our problems and does not turn them away. We bring them about as we make each tiny choice every day. Good choices, bad choices, we have two sorts of choice.

God said to Daniel (10:12) after his long prayers and fasting, mourning for God’s people in captivity, *“for from the first day that thou didst set thine heart to understand, and to chasten thyself before thy God, thy words were heard, and I am come for thy words...Now I am come to make thee understand ...”* That is enough for us, too, to understand that He does hear our petitions. So Daniel and Job and all God’s faithful servants are encouraged in their limited vision when they see a distorted reality, and God reassures them and enhances their understanding.

God said to Job, “*if you cannot comprehend the visible world you live in, how can you expect to comprehend a world you cannot see?*” So then, shown the big picture by God, Job repented.

It is the same principle we say of our fathers, “*they would have marveled to see what we see in this world today*”. We are comparing the progress in the natural world made in our time from the time of our fathers, and how they would stand uncomprehending in this new time. How much more uncomprehending then it is to compare the natural and supernatural worlds? Understanding our difficulties, God will anticipate our needs, like He did for Job. He will give us the answers about our faith and the answers for those who doubt God’s existence in our lives, tormenting us.

The big picture contains much more detail than we can ever comprehend and so our own personal dreams, and the shattering of them, are insignificant in the big picture. That does not mean that God thinks we are insignificant, nor that He will restore our losses, but it does mean that He just needs to move the circumstances on, whether we understand or not. It requires faith to believe that we are never abandoned, and faith to trust in His “moving on” decisions, and faith to remain with hope for the ultimate conclusion of it all, no matter what the result is or how silent that silence is. In our memories the goodness we had should be uppermost. We do remember with pleasure the goodwill, and how we were encouraged, wishing only to be there again. He understands, helping us as we waver. We pray (Psalm 119:28) “*My soul weeps because of grief; Strengthen me according to Your word*”.



25. Choices to make in our suffering

Sometimes, eventually after the grief, we may be able to choose something cheerful when we once again have a sliver of bright daylight in view. We can fill that space with sense of serenity and peace and feel it grow within us. It is misery which keeps us in the pit of despair, where no light shines in. It is difficult to live in the dark. There, in darkness, minds are constantly agitating away about our disappointment. So cheerfulness and happiness are necessary and worth the effort to grow. A state of happiness is essentially a state of going somewhere whole heartedly, in a forward direction, without regret or reservation, even when the gift that was taken away from us is never restored. **God helps us in the healing over the loss and disappointment and into the happiness again and that is a renewed gift. He will grant us that new gift, if we ask.**

When depression occurs it is a state of disorder, essentially a state of inability to rise up. There is a compulsion to stay bent and bowed with no direction, full of regrets and great pain about the past, unable to move forward. **That is the time to wait on the Lord and to rest in the palm of His hand, and to cry "Help" until He brings the piece of daylight once more into our heart.**

We can maximize our chances, by getting about, relaxing with friends, and enjoying new experiences. We can grow positive thoughts, smile when you do not feel like it, thereby growing better instincts on how to make good decisions and to discard the foreboding thoughts. We can be optimistic and persist in the face of failure, interacting with other people with a sunny disposition, and become self fulfilling. Thinking of something worse than your own troubles, is a good skill, and turning sad events into something good is helpful. Everyone needs to feel special and know that we are special in God's eyes. Most of the faithful did not see any reversals of their ill fortune in great encounters with God, not like Job. Rather the worthies felt God's approval of them, that they were special, and that was enough for them. In their flesh they did see God, and appreciating the promises He made to them, they knew that they would be, in the future, fulfilled.

We are hard wired in health to want to live, and we do pray for the lives of others as well. But if God has not "*looked away*", nor has He failed to "*keep up*" with us, then He knows and sees all. Our prayers are our acknowledgments of His presence and His Wisdom. We are clearly unqualified to put into perspective His wisdom, but we still want it, to see it more clearly for ourselves. God understands our lack of ability to understand His wisdom and He knows that we suffer deeply when life is threatened, or taken. He also knows that we

are all in degrees of understanding in regard to the His faithful ones who are early taken in death, and that some of us are more accepting, and others less accepting. Prayer is a wonderful relief, and to put oneself in the palm of God's hand with importuning can always bring God into the pit of despair, when He will consider His servants, as He did Job. He can remove the thorn, or bestow mighty blessings, if He will. All is possible with Him, depending on the larger perspective. And God does change His mind depending on His plan for us. So we can say, "*if the Lord wills*" and keep importuning.

It is so important to keep the positive always before us. We should try every day, all day. However it will still be beneficial when circumstances set us in the negative, that we know how far we can go, still fully appreciating the closeness of God, even in His apparent silence. Those released from the torture chamber assure us that it is possible. It is so difficult to keep in His hand when it appears that His hand is closed against us. We might be tempted to wonder whether there is a catch in the good when it comes, so that, contrariwise, we are led to think that God is only in the bad. We wonder perhaps if the shadows reflect Him better. People, who live longtime in torment with torture, need to have a hope of the open hand, otherwise there is so little reason to exist. **Disappointment is in itself a flag that we that we have a hunger for something different, and it is that hope we hang onto. It is in that hope that God sends healing for us and then the choices we make for God will see us continue in understanding away from our previous misunderstanding. Understanding helps in the choices we make in suffering towards healing, for we know God exists. He will save us.**



26. God's non answer in our suffering

Evidently God's non answer to Job, satisfied Job for he said, “ *Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know ... Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes*”, before any of his losses had been restored, and while he was still sitting on the ash pile, naked and covered in sores. It was not when God gave him treasures again that Job re-affirmed his faith in God. It was **in his naked and natural state, he had been given a glimpse of the supernatural. It was God's appearance and His voice that shook Job into an acknowledgement, not actually what He said. The silent Father, the hidden One, the Someone out there who it seemed would not answer, spoke. God spoke, and Job heard.**

The detail of the former questions escaped Job's mind for it did not matter now. God was there. The terrible loss of his treasures, that had followed one on the other for Job in his life, had faded when Job understood his place in the considerations of God. **When Job refused to give up on God, despite the pleadings of all his accusers, he won the contest with them, and was then privileged to see what he would have missed had he succumbed to their suggestions.**

But it does not happen to us like it happened to Job. God's revealing of Himself in the OT did not make his children stronger. They faithlessly complained, set boundaries for God and asked for tangible evidence of His presence. He often did respond and gave them miracles. Do we also make our faith contingent upon a demonstration of His presence in our lives? Or are we able to express our desires and love for Him in His silence, or in a miracle, whatever is His will? If we expect God's intervention, it may well be that our faith is destroyed by the absence of proofs. If we do not receive relief from God for our trial, it requires more faithfulness to go forward in Him. If there is no visible message from God that makes for a hard journey, but it grows stronger faith.

If we rely only on messages of His good will for us, then we set ourselves a standard where God does not wish to be. In our own strength of accepting disappointment, we keep ourselves protected against a permanent state of disappointment. We need to understand that we may not manipulate God to do our will, but rather we should be where we do His will no matter what happens in our lives. Hebrews 11 gives lists of faithful saints who did not see the blessings that they had been promised, but they still died in expectation. It seems sometimes that the seen and real and natural world cannot relate to the unseen, unreal, unnatural supernatural world. But when we have a better balance in understanding God in His unseen, unreal, unnatural supernatural

world, it may then become part of what comes natural to us, becoming in that sense more spiritually real to us. **Through our faith in Him, the unseen world takes better shape, and we live for God, not for other people, “for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal”, 2 Corinthians 4 18. To us now, and in the future, this unseen and invisible world is the Kingdom of God. We can have it all now, if we will.**

Some faithful saints died martyrs, some were stoned, others were beheaded, all still with hope in something unseen. They were delivered in hope “*unto death for Jesus’ sake*”. Job, seeing the supernatural, was again comforted and blessed. Is the circumstance of Job receiving the blessings again, and having it recorded for us, so that we might have a glimpse as well? The record of **Job’s new understanding is a testimony to God, and to us, of the unseen, unreal, unnatural supernatural perspective, a foretaste of a spiritual future we can hardly grasp.**

It is in those flashes of light, like this restoration of Job, and the resurrection of Jesus, we can see meaning for us. It is the glimpse of a golden future where there are the signs of God and the world He wants. When we see a good deed or a blessing done for us, or for another, we glimpse the presence of God. Those are the spiritual blessings which we can expect. **If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied, more than all men. But to have hope in the future, when this life is hard to grasp and full of unresolved misery, the future hope is the only way forward. If we do not have that hope, we have no hope.**



27. God's promises to us in our suffering

The ability of God to conquer evil and restore the heavens and the earth to the original perfection, is a promise brought to us through the pages of Scripture, and that demonstrates His love and power. If we do not believe that, it is not a failure on God's behalf, rather it indicates that we have moved away from God. It is not that the prophets spoke nonsense about peace and justice. It is that the time of fulfilling those prophecies, is still future. There are still wars over all the earth, evil is winning, sickness and death is ever present, and we have no peace. But still we are called, not to look back at our ungodly history, or to our miserable present, but to see beyond these calamities, to a distant place when we shall see God, face to face, like Job declared, *"in my flesh I will see God"*. Our experience with this world makes it difficult to envisage any future world, for any burst of happiness we may see, hear or feel, is only a small and infrequent glimpse of what is to come. **We can never fully appreciate what is to come, but we trust also in God's provision, that it will be a worthwhile portent for us.**

God never demeans those who struggle with disappointment longing for the gift to be returned. In fact the anguish of His saints is taken up endlessly, and consoled for in Scripture, but suffering is always embroidered with the word *"temporary"*. The suffering then becomes a sort of hunger for something pain free and the bitter disappointment becomes a longing for the better thing. It is like a home sickness for the things of God, with a yearning for Him. *"The need of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time"*, said TS Eliot. **The place to arrive will be the Ideal of Creation.** *"I saw a new heavens and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away"*, or as it was in the beginning, before sin entered in.

So we have two choices, to live as if we believe God exists, or to live as if we believe God does not exist.

- * If we believe God does not exist, then that is to live without God.
 - * If we do not believe in the certainly of God, then it is to live uncertain of anything in our lives.
 - * If we want an alternative to living with the disappointments of God, then we can live with our disappointments, without God.
- If we believe God exists, none of these are satisfactory solutions.

If *God* does exist for us, we can ask for changes to occur, say, to remove a hard and tormenting heart, but that does not mean that He will necessarily remove that person or their evil, which is causing the suffering. It means that, as we

pray for relief, He might decide to give us better means to manage the suffering. A sure way for relief is to continue in our prayer life, living a *“life in the spirit with Him”*. Then we will be ready to accept whatever outcomes He desires. Hard hearts, like Pharaoh’s over God’s people, rule with power not easily letting go of that power. That makes people afraid. But if we let go of the present and future fear, suffering can then become of less consequence, and even not valued enough to be questioned, for God looks after His saints. He builds a wall of safety around His own. If we continue to be afraid of evil suffering, the past will again rise up, and fear will crush us all over again. Suffering will not crush us, just the realization of it in real terms. It is imperative to let the fear go, other wise we lock fear into our future as well.

If we believe God exists, and is not silent, then the question of suffering rests firmly on our faith. In faith the just shall live. We need to be perfectly clear that where God is, there need be no fear. Then, living with the certainty of God and always looking up to Him, might mean living with the disappointment also, but without fear. Adversity and suffering can try to claim us, but we can be immune when God surrounds us with His wall. We will not be afraid or harmed, for we are His, and He is in us.

Before her execution, Corrie Ten Boom said in her understanding of the affliction that befalls us, *“Look outward and be distressed, look inward and be depressed, look upward and be at rest”*. Quite so.

Beverley Russell - June 2008

