



Pastoring the Dying and Bereaved

The subject reduced me to the position of Jeremiah, *'Ah Lord God! Behold, I cannot speak'* (Jer. 1:6). I resolved to withdraw from giving the paper. Then in three weeks, I faced four funerals; one lady was my own age. These were people I knew and visited and cared for and loved; I conducted their funerals as one who mourned their passing — not as a professional cleric. What a blessing it is to me that Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus.

At the same time, Madge Featherstone's doctor told me to prepare for her funeral in May; she is still with us rejoicing in the Lord. My prayer is that God should not take her till her daughter, a spiritualist and her son a Jehovah's Witness turn to the Christ of Scripture. The daughter is now attending our services. Then a dear man in his 60s was diagnosed with aggressive lung cancer. It seemed to me that God was shutting me up to this subject.

For 15 years a significant part of my work has been to see dear saints from earth to heaven. What a privilege! They have done me more good than I have done them. My subject is counselling or rather, pastoring the dying and the bereaved.

The Failure of the NHS

On Thursday, 27 August 2009, the Patients Association of the UK published a report on 16 elderly patients. In the foreword, Claire Rayner says, *'the Patients Association has been receiving calls on our Helpline from people wanting to talk about the dreadful, neglectful, demeaning, painful and sometimes downright cruel treatment their elderly relatives had experienced at the hands of NHS nurses'*. A woman's daughter complains, *'I was shocked at the lack of dignity and compassion shown to her'*.

Since compassion is of God, we should be shocked but not too surprised at the contents of the report. As Christian citizens, we are thankful to God for the good work done by the medical profession. But we need to be realistic about human nature. Our country has largely abandoned the Christian faith and its work-ethic. No longer do people do things *'heartily, as to the Lord and not to men'*; no longer are people restrained by the fear of God from whom nothing may be hid; no longer do people have a sense of accountability to God on the Day of Judgment; no longer do people operate with the royal law, *'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'*. The words of Jesus no longer resonate in society: *'whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them'* (Mt. 7:12).

Without the Christian faith, there is little to sustain human kindness even in the medical profession, especially when it requires hard work and inconvenience, getting the hands dirty or considerable expenditure.

Caring Pastors and Elders

I am persuaded that a church community, led by a caring pastor and elders, is able to make a considerable difference to those who suffer affliction and may even influence the way the medical profession cares for people. If we visit the sick, if we show an interest in the elderly, if we keep an eye on those without a family to plead their cause, if we are prepared to ask questions and to complain at neglect, we may make a difference. On occasion I have accompanied them to the doctors; they come away saying, *'Wasn't he nice'* but have no idea what he said. I take notes and explain it all to them.

We do not need a PhD in counselling to know that the dying and bereaved need what Dr John Ling calls 'principled love'. We need a pastor's heart; we need the love of Christ shed abroad in our hearts.

A local Reformed minister regards himself as a preacher and not a pastor. An elderly lady in his congregation told me, 'he has not visited me since Mark (her husband) died seven years ago'. That is not walking in love.

Pattern

At the end of his 3rd missionary journey, the Apostle Paul met with the Ephesian elders. He had earlier spent three years of pastoral ministry among them. In many places he lasted a couple of weeks in the synagogue before being thrown out of synagogue and city. But in Corinth he stayed 18 months and in Ephesus 3 years, so he was able to function as a pastor. He spoke of the character of his ministry:

'Ye know ... after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears and temptations ... how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have showed you and have taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ'.

Acts 20:18-21

Brethren, let that be the pattern of your ministry. The love imperatives of Romans 12 reflect Paul's pastoral involvement with the Ephesian congregation: *'Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another ... Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep'* (vv 9, 10, 15) etc. He knew all about it; he had lived like that at Ephesus.

You are pastors before you are preachers; you preach to them and for them because you love them. After preaching you visit them and teach them in their homes, mindful of the words of the Lord Jesus, Matthew 25, *'For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me... Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me'*.

Job's Friends

Job's three friends loved him to the extent that they got alongside him and sat with him for a week in silence and then wrestled with him over the problem of suffering. They are a rebuke to those who stand aloof from the afflicted. They were sincere men, well motivated, constrained by love.

However Job's three friends stand as a warning to all who offer counsel to those who walk through the valley of the shadow of death. They increased Job's sufferings and added to his anguish of soul.

How often do Christian counsellors increase the anguish of the afflicted by wrong counsel? They do it from the best of motives, according to the wisdom they have; yet they may do more damage than good. For example a local minister in Workington teaches that given sufficient faith, Christians will be healed. That is cruel to my believing friend who attends that church; he has Parkinson's disease. Mercifully, he is persuaded that his sickness is not due to secret sin nor to lack of faith but is the will of God, whose grace is sufficient in his increasing weakness.

Where did Job's friends go wrong? In Job 42:7, God charged them: *'My wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends: for ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath'*. Note that; their knowledge of God was deficient. They applied the Deuteronomic principle of blessing for obedience and cursing for disobedience to Job. It is fair to raise the issue;

it is to be raised by elders summoned to pray for the sick, James 5. But Job, who was ready to confess fault, did not know what he had done wrong. And his friends persisted in attributing his suffering to secret and unconfessed sin.

The reader knows that God Himself said of Job that he was perfect, blameless, upright, feared God and eschewed evil — ran a mile from evil. Would that such things could be said of us. In Job 2:3 God told Satan that Job was afflicted *'without cause'*; his friends claimed there was cause for his suffering in his sin. Job's friends had a deficient understanding of the ways of God.

Let us take warning and learn of God that we may speak truth to the bereaved and the dying lest we do them more harm than good.

In a sense, Job's faith and wisdom accentuated his problem. In one day he lost his oxen and donkeys to Sabeen raiders; his camels to an unprovoked Chaldean enemy with many servants slain; his sheep in a fire-storm; his ten sons and daughters in a tornado. He acknowledged it was the hand of God, *'The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord'* (Job 1:21). When he suffered in his body and his wife played the devil's advocate and told him to curse God, he said, *'Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?'* (2:10). His comfort was in God, the ultimate cause of all that comes to pass.

But he was mystified as to why God was afflicting him. The reader is given a more nuanced insight into what was going on than was given to Job. The reader is informed of the secret will of God. Satan claims sovereignty over the earth — walking to and fro, up and down. But God points out that there is none like Job, a perfect, blameless and upright man, who fears God and eschews evil! Explain that! Satan puts his spin on the situation — Job obeys God for the reward (chap 1); Job loves life more than he loves God. In chapter 2 Satan predicts that if God touch Job, he will curse Him to His face. And then God authorized Satan to afflict Job (1:12 & 2:6), but limits the damage he may do. In the event, Job did not sin with his mouth; his afflictions demonstrated the genuineness of his faith.

What a comfort to know that there are not two forces — good and evil — pitted against each other! God is sovereign; Satan operates only under His sovereignty; with His permission and under God-ordained limits.

However there is no comfort in the knowledge that Satan has a part in our suffering. Our comfort is in God whose purposes are good. Yet in the day of trouble it helps to know that the trial of faith, the constraint to do evil, the temptation to curse God, is not of God but is of Satan, for God tempts no one, James 1:13. We need to understand that suffering is a trial of faith that has the capacity to destroy us. Yet as Joseph told his brothers, *'ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good'* (Gen. 50:20). Even Satan acknowledged that God is the ultimate cause of all that comes to pass, Job 1:11 and 2:5. Therefore our comfort is in God; though we do well to know Satan's evil purpose in our afflictions in order that we may put on the whole armour of God.

Job, for 35 chapters (3-37), wrestles with the problem of suffering at the hand of God Almighty. His friends said much about God, some of which was sound but they were theorizing. Job also said much about God but he wanted more; he constantly appealed directly to God; he wanted a face-to-face meeting with God. And in the end, God granted it to him: *'Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind'*. How did God counsel Job?

Be a man

God said (38:3-4): *'Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?'* The Lord graciously appeared to him and called him to stand and gird his loins and answer Him like a man.

1. God puts Job in his place. Be a man; do not play at being God. Each question God puts to Job puts him in his place. *'Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?'* God is saying, 'I am God; I laid the foundations of the earth; I knew what to do. You were not there.

You do not know what to do'. The problem with humanity is that we want to put ourselves in the place of God; we want to do what only God should do or can do aright. It comes down to morality; to who decides what is right and what is wrong. That's the big issue! God told Adam not to eat of the fruit of a tree in the Garden; Adam decided it would make him wise, so he ate. He put himself in the place of God and decided what was right for himself.

So do we. God says, '*You shall not kill*'. Millions of unborn babies are murdered each year. Our society discreetly practises euthanasia; infanticide is increasing — doctors are allowed by law not to feed sick babies rejected by parents! We refuse to prosecute those who assist suicide. Soon those who burden society will be encouraged to end their own lives. For years, the sign 'Nil by mouth' has been used to starve certain patients to death. We are not far from doing what Germany did before the Second World War, putting people down like animals.

Leave aside the extreme cases; it goes on all the time in human society. We make our own rules and live by our own standards, so putting ourselves in the place of God. God asks, '*Where were you*' at creation? Are you God? Are you Creator? No; let God be God and man be man.

2. Be a man, not an animal. The pivotal verse in Job 38-39 is 38:36, '*Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts? or who hath given understanding to the heart?*' Before it, vv 4-34, God asks Job questions about the created universe, about the sea and its bounds; about the rising sun revealing earth's features; the weather in many aspects and the stars. After it, 38:39-39:30, God asks questions about the animals. The distinguishing characteristic of man is the God-given capacity to think; the potential for wisdom and understanding. Man is made in the image of God for fellowship with God. Unlike the animals, man is a responsible, thinking being. God holds us to be morally accountable to Him.

Be a man; be a thinking, responsible being; act with intelligence and integrity, dignity and sobriety as man/woman made in God's image. Remember Adam? When God questioned him over his disobedience, he hid from God and blamed his wife! I'm not responsible — she is! That is sub-manly behaviour; it's denying moral responsibility. These days we are experts at passing the buck: blame parents; blame your upbringing; blame circumstances; blame the weather, the taxman, the government — but never play the man and accept responsibility! Yet God calls us each to stand as a man in His presence to answer His questions.

Above all, 38:36, '*Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts? or who hath given understanding to the heart?*' From whom do you derive your intelligence? How can inanimate things produce intelligence? Can a thing made be greater than its creator? Can a non-thinking thing, without wisdom, create a thinking person with wisdom? Surely not! We thinking beings must have originated from a greater Mind! God made man in His own image with the capacity for understanding and wisdom.

How then does God comfort Job? For 37 chapters, Job has wrestled with the problem of suffering and in 38-41 God says nothing about his sufferings! Is there then an answer to the problem of suffering in the book of Job? Yes there is! God speaks about Himself. Brethren, the answer to suffering is God Himself. Therefore speak to them about your God.

Speak to them about your God

Think about it. Let me stimulate your thoughts:

1. God is under no obligation to explain to us why we are suffering. He knows the reason why. It is sufficient for us to know that God most Merciful is the ultimate cause behind all that comes to pass.
2. Job asked the question 'Why?' — 'Why is this happening to me?' It is not wrong to ask the question 'Why?' But God spoke about Himself. God changed the question to 'Who?' When you

suffer, you do not need to know the reason why but you do need to know WHO is ultimately behind your troubles — God most Merciful.

3. God tells Job repeatedly that He is God the Creator and Sustainer of all things. Is that the doctrine that you tell those who suffer? Well, No! But it is what God told the suffering Job. And that is the basis for all comfort — that this is God's world which He sustains and over which He reigns, doing His will, achieving His purposes.
4. Job spoke of God as creator of all things. He knew that; he had learnt that; he had assented to that; he had ticked that box. Why then did God state it over and over again? Iain Murray spoke about preaching to the conscience. That is what God is doing! When we preach we make a point and we move on. The people know it, but when God makes a point, He hammers it home until the man cries out with an awakened conscience, *'Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth'* (40:4).

The answer to suffering is God Himself

Brethren, the answer to the problem of suffering is God Himself. When we suffer, we need God. I do!

Job's friends talked endlessly about God; they theorized about God. Job talked directly to God; he questioned God directly. He cried out for a face to face meeting with God. That is what we need when we are suffering!

Listen to Psalm 23:4: *'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me'*. You are with me! The Good Shepherd is with me! Christ is with me! In the day of trouble, I need Him; I need His felt presence, the reality of God with me.

Haven't you had the experience of reading Job 38-39 or 38-41 and found yourself stunned, overwhelmed; your objections are silenced; your complaints dried up; your sin exposed; your tears flow; you cannot speak because you have experienced God to be God and now you know yourself.

We talk about doctrine endlessly but have we have experienced the God of that doctrine? We need an experience of God in relation to every doctrine we claim to believe. We need to know the felt presence of God in connection with the truths we say we believe. In all our afflictions, we need to know the presence of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Walk for a moment on the Emmaus Road. Jesus draws near to comfort two grieving disciples. Before He reveals His own identity, He expounds to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. And their hearts warmed within them as He opened to them the Scriptures.

We need that felt presence of Christ, that experience of the life-giving word of Christ quickening our hearts. That is true comfort!

You need to experience God

Brethren, I expound the Scriptures by the grace given to me but I cannot give people the experience of God. Job knew what I am talking about. In 42:5 Job says, *'I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee'*. He is not talking about ear-gate and eye-gate and claiming that it is better to see than to hear. That is not the point, though of course it will be best when we see His face, face to face. He is talking about the difference between theorizing about God and experiencing the felt presence of God. Listen to the prophet Isaiah in chapter 43:1-2, *'But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee'*. The Lord goes on to say, *'For I am the Lord thy God ... I have loved thee ... for I am with thee'* (vv 3-5). I cannot give people that experience; only the Spirit of God can make God known to them. I count the presence of Jesus Christ the most precious thing in life! When we hear the Word of God in the house of God, the Spirit of God draws near and

warms our hearts within us and humbles us and comforts us and teaches us to trust in the Lord; He is my Shepherd King and if He is with me, I am content whatever happens in life. Notice I have stopped talking about counselling the bereaved. Their suffering grieves me to the heart. I am the mortal man who needs the comfort of the experience of God. Only then can I minister to others with the comfort wherewith I have been comforted of God. We must minister to ourselves before we are able to minister to others.

Through suffering, God puts us in our place as man in the presence of God. I love the refrain that Ezekiel used repeatedly: *'and ye shall know that I am the Lord'*. After judgment, after blessing, *'and ye shall know that I am the Lord'*. That is what our people need to experience in the day of affliction.

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