



Compassion in a Broken World:

The powerful support of God's Spirit in weakness

They stood at the grave of their stillborn son. Their hearts were completely broken. There was an open wound. Oh, you couldn't readily see that. Everybody sang exuberantly and enthusiastically. Praise at the top of their voices. Together with their fellow-Christians they gave expression to the joy of their faith. The songs spoke beautifully about victory over death. She fell apart first, several months later. Then he did too. And what came to the surface then scared them both.

I want to draw attention to the following issue:

Sooner or later, every Christian has to face the brokenness of life. Despite the Spirit's power, not everything in this life can be mended. Is that the fault of the Christian who hasn't enough trust? Or does God intentionally allow brokenness to exist?

Section 1 discusses how God comes to meet us in our longing for comfort. What may Christians expect of God the Holy Spirit when they are confronted with brokenness? We are still living in the time of the *not yet*.

Section 2 considers the question whether you can say that brokenness is an aspect of a communion in Christ's suffering. Or does that apply only to persecution because of our faith?

In section 3 I consider how much room there is for grief and what the relationship is between grief and the joy of faith.

Section 4 then turns to the question whether we are allowed to complain about our distress and what our attitude should be when God doesn't change what was crooked.

In section 5 I use the difficult road we have to travel when we must forgive another person in a broken situation as an example of living in a broken world.

I conclude with a discussion of a communal longing for healing, together with the Spirit, in section 6.

1. He Helps Us in Our Weakness

Longing for comfort

Job's friends began so well. They came to sympathize with their friend and to comfort him. But when they saw how greatly he suffered, they remained silent for seven days and seven nights (Job 2:11-13). They empathized intensely with their friend and shared his suffering. But they did not leave it at that. When Job himself broke the silence, they exhausted themselves by advancing reasons for Job's misery. It can't be God's fault, so Job must have brought it on himself. Job defends himself bitterly against his friends, who presume to act as God's advocates. He says that there is *no* demonstrable reason for his suffering. Job's reaction demonstrates that he feels his friends have

misjudged and repudiated him. They did not satisfy his longing for comfort. How passionate is his cry: 'If only my anguish could be weighed and all my misery be placed on the scales! It would surely outweigh the sand of the seas....' (Job 6:2-3)!

Despite all their good intentions, explanations, and truths, Job's friends offer only cheap comfort. Eventually, Job will cry out: 'I have heard many things like these; miserable comforters are you all! Will your long-winded speeches never end? What ails you that you keep on arguing?' (Job 16:2-3).

When we long greatly for comfort in difficult situations, we are often very disappointed when no comfort is offered. It was not only Job who suffered because his friends did not understand him. People are often fobbed off with cheap comfort: think of it this way, it could be *a lot* worse. Or: you *still* have so much to be thankful for. What happens in those situations is that the speakers fail to pay attention to what is broken. Some don't know what to say. Others avoid the topic all together. Yet others urge the grieving person to expect much more from God the Holy Spirit, who is able to heal like no one else.

Offering comfort is difficult. It demands much wisdom and insight to show compassion. We don't know how to comfort as we ought. But God's Spirit, the Comforter, does.

Support of the Spirit

The letter to the Romans tells us that creation in all its parts is suffering (Rom 8:18-22). Evidently, every person will experience brokenness. Creation suffers greatly from frustration; nothing happens in the way God intended. For this suffering Paul uses the striking metaphor of groaning as in the pains of childbirth. All of creation groans for healing.

The children of God do not escape it either. They share in the general judgment of God (Rom 8:20). When they are struck with an incurable illness or face other difficulties, they share in the groaning of creation. For they too *groan* as they wait eagerly for their adoption as sons, the redemption of their bodies (Rom 8:23). And it is amazing that the Spirit *himself* intercedes for them with *groans* that words cannot express (Rom 8:26). He does not withdraw himself. He does not just concentrate himself solely on recovery and healing. Instead, he takes the suffering in the world to heart. He demonstrates that he is intensely involved in deep compassion with all who discover something of the brokenness of life in the fault lines of their lives.

God's Spirit knows that the suffering of the present time does not compare with the glory that is coming (Rom 8:18). That is why he *is* involved with the brokenness that exists. He is the Comforter who hears our longings, such as that expressed by Job: "If only ... all my misery [could] be placed on the scales!" (Job 6:2). The Holy Spirit is a Comforter who groans along with us. That is not evidence of weakness, but evidence of strength. He goes through the depths with us. He bears us up in the groans and moans of our suffering. And his groaning along with us supports us, because as Spirit of Christ he can sympathize with our weaknesses.

He has promised his support by his powerful intercession in accordance with God's will (Rom 8:26-27). He prays inwardly in us. He articulates our weaknesses with groans that words cannot express. And he fathoms the distress for which human beings cannot find the words and passes it on to God. God's Spirit gathers all the prayers in heaven and on earth and places them before God's throne (Rev 8:3). He connects the sighs on earth with the sighs in heaven: 'How long, Sovereign Lord?' (Rev 6:10).

Not Yet

When even those in heaven do not seek perfection before the appointed time, why should we let ourselves be tempted to do so? Do all injuries, sickness, grief, difficulties, and disappointments in this world have to be removed? Did God ever promise that? Why should everything here be restored at whatever the cost? God's Spirit does not seek perfection before its time. He does not heal all fault lines. He does not by any means take away all *present-day* suffering. He allows much

of it to continue. But as the great Comforter, he promises to put his shoulder to the wheel. And that is sufficiently promising!

Christians received the Spirit as a gift, as the first fruits of the harvest to come (Rom 8:23). Not for nothing is he known as the first fruit. He precedes us. He is in the lead. The harvest is not yet complete. But even in our suffering that we, as God's children, must also undergo, he already lets fruits of love, faithfulness, patience, and self-control grow.

In fact this waiting is nothing new. It has been the mark of believers of all ages (Heb 11). Consider how often and how long Abraham, the father of *all* believers, had to wait. God promised him so much, but each time he had to practice patience, even to the utmost. First there was the prospect of a country (Gen 12:7; 15:18); then the promise of a son (Gen 15:2; 17:17). But in the end all died without having received what was promised; 'they only saw [those things] and welcomed them from a distance' (Heb 11:13). That still applies after Christ's coming and the outpouring of his Spirit. 'We live by faith, not by sight' (2 Cor 5:7), even though much has been fulfilled compared to Old Testament times.

All of this is emphasized again by that beautiful expression of Paul, that gives me so much comfort. He underlines the 'not yet' by admitting that the (new) life of every Christian is still hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3). Only when Christ, who is our life, appears, shall we appear with him in glory (Col 3:4).

Rest in the Midst of Unrest

When the Lord Jesus was on earth, he took away many burdens from people. But he didn't do so always and he certainly did not remove all their burdens. He invites each of us to come to him: 'Come to me, *all* you who are weary and burdened...' (Mt 11:28). He doesn't say: all who feel yourselves burdened. Apparently everyone feels burdened. And he promises: 'I will give you *rest*' (Mt 11:28)! Knowing the rest that Jesus gives doesn't mean that there will no longer be any difficulties in your life. But he exerts himself for his Christians: 'Take my yoke upon you.... For my yoke is easy and my burden is light' (Mt 11:28-29). No one can ever learn enough. Therefore, 'learn from me' (Mt 11:29). And strikingly he adds, 'for I am gentle and humble in heart'. In the school of life with him as teacher, you learn to be small.

Against this background, the meaning of what Paul says in 2 Cor 12:7, '*To keep me from becoming conceited ... there was given me a thorn in my flesh*', becomes clear. Paul is very emphatic about this. Three times Paul pleaded with the Lord to be rid of this 'thorn' (2 Cor 12:8). We don't know exactly what the problem was. But it is clear that Paul suffered from it. However, the Lord tells him that he will not take the thorn away. Not because of Paul himself. Nor because his faith was insufficient. But because God's *grace* was sufficient! The power of Christ could only reveal itself fully in Paul's weakness (2 Cor 12:9).

2. The Fellowship of Sharing in Christ's Sufferings

'Life in Christ can only become more beautiful', said the minister. 'For everything is possible for him who believes. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. Truly, you are able to do almost anything if you let yourself be guided by the power of God. We are the same glass of water as everyone else, except that we have the effervescent tablet of the Holy Spirit in us!'

A Victorious Life

In the so-called 'service of healing' it is often emphasized that God wants to glorify his name through healing. Supposedly God does not want any sickness here on earth, only healing. If only Christians were of one mind with him and had a higher expectation, that would happen.... Those who teach this, apply this victory not only to the healing of the sick, but also to all kinds of difficulties and stubbornness that human beings run into. *That* God can work miracles is beyond dispute. He is strong and powerful enough (Eph 3:20)! When he achieves victories, he does it in the

power of Christ's resurrection. And then Christians experience fellowship in his resurrection (Phil 3:10).

But there is another side to this too! Paul says in that same verse that we also share in Christ's suffering. Are these not separate things? Do we begin with the power of the resurrection and end up with suffering? Isn't the order reversed? Shouldn't it be suffering first and then resurrection? Besides, Christ's suffering is behind him, isn't it? How can you then still speak of sharing in his suffering? Paul is not referring here to the suffering on the cross, as though that is not yet finished. Christ's suffering is indeed behind him. He endured it all and overcame suffering. He conquered evil. He attained the victory. But that doesn't mean that the suffering of his disciples is also finished. And to show how closely Christ takes that suffering to heart, Paul actually refers to Christ sympathy for us as *his sufferings* (2 Cor 1:5; Col 1:24).

The Lord Jesus announced that himself. When you follow him, you should not count on one success after the other. You can expect setbacks and oppression. A disciple is not greater than his Lord (John 15:20; Matt 10:24; Luke 6:40; John 13:16). But no matter how great the difficulty we face may be, in communion with Christ, we are more than conquerors (Rom 8:37). Following Christ can mean great sacrifices that can cause pain and difficulties (1 Pet 2:20-25).

The Whole Breadth of Life

It is true that the suffering about which Paul speaks is referable in first instance to the oppression he undergoes in the service of Christ (2 Cor 1:3-7). He bears the abuse of Christ, is opposed, and undergoes imprisonment and torture (2 Cor 4:8-10; 11:23, 24). That is also why he concludes in Romans 8:35: 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?' No other power of sickness or death will be able to separate us from him (Rom 8:38, 39). Because Christ has borne all the pain, it is bearable for his Christians.

But Paul said this after he described the suffering of the whole of creation and of the children of God. The fact that Christ also sympathized with this suffering, gave Paul the confidence to connect *all* that we suffer to him. That includes the pain of the thorn in the flesh that caused difficulties in Paul's life. He had to be satisfied with the grace of God who demonstrates his power in the weakness of human beings (2 Cor 12:9, 10). This does not leave Paul to his own resources, but casts him on the living God, who has promised to support him in his difficulties. For everything that he doesn't receive, he may fall back on him. Is that really any different than: let the presence of my Spirit be sufficient for you?

Paul applies this to the whole breadth of his life. When he is imprisoned, he looks back over his many and various circumstances. He learnt about hunger and being well-fed, he experienced living in plenty, but also in poverty and want (Phil 4:11, 12). He learnt to be content whatever the circumstances he found himself in! (Note that it does not say that he learnt to be content with what he had.) Paul's love for God became so great that he no longer depended upon what happened to himself. The circumstances mattered, certainly, but he was not handed over to or dependent upon them.

When you belong to Christ, you amount to more than your circumstances. What matters then is who you are for him. No one lives for herself. Whether we are well or ill, whether we live or die, whatever our circumstances, it is for the Lord (Rom 14:7, 8). God can glorify his name by granting healing, but also by allowing suffering (Phil 1:20). The latter happens when he lets love flourish through pain, and lets fruits grow from faithfulness, patience, persistence, and perseverance. How often doesn't it happen that we must conclude after the fact that an event, no matter how painful, resulted in many good things and that it eventually brought you closer to God! Pruning produces flowers. That is not an exception, but a way that God himself has pointed out, through suffering to glory (Rom 8:17; 2 Thess 1:3-7; 2 Tim 4:5; 1 Pet 5:10).

Strength in Weakness

Paul had to learn the hard way. He is initiated (Phil 4:12) into a mystery that he did not know about before. And this is the mystery: 'when I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Cor 12:10)! Previously, Paul was strong and powerful of himself. Now he seems to be a weakling. Previously, he moved in the company of scholars, now his companions are slaves. Previously, he was a respected citizen, now he is a prisoner. Since he got to know Christ, humanly speaking everything has gone downhill for Paul. Following Jesus certainly didn't translate into a successful career. He wasn't able to impress the Corinthians very much (2 Cor 5:12, 13). False teachers asked, 'Is this an exceptional apostle? Does this weak and unattractive person, Paul, emanate from Christ?!' He is almost compelled to commend himself (2 Cor 3:1).

Little by little, Paul had to discover that in his weakness Christ's power is accomplished. In fact, that weakness was necessary to reveal Christ's power (2 Cor 4:7-15). That is why Paul could speak so highly of his weakness (2 Cor 12:9). Not that he found it so pleasant. It went against his nature. But he came to understand that Christ makes room to display his power when *our* life is challenged. And that is why he is able to provide such comfort to others, by sharing the comfort that he himself received (2 Cor 1:3-7).

'I can do everything through him who gives me strength' (Phil 4:13). I don't want to mitigate or emasculate this statement in any way. When Christ says, 'apart from me you can do nothing' (John 15:5), it also means: You are able to do much in my strength. Or, to quote Paul, Christ 'is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us' (Eph 3:20)! We may not tone down the power of Christ, but that pronouncement from the letter to the Philippians is not at all triumphalistic. It is not bravura on the part of a stalwart Christian, but a recognition, gained through experience, by a weak Christian and a strong Christ. Paul writes it as he reflects back on his life. He doesn't demand attention for a strong Christian (2 Cor 4:5). Rather, he speaks as a man who admits that he remains weak! But who, in his weakness, looks to that strong Christ.

Being a Christian does not consist of belief in a doctrinal system that you must try to put into practice as much as possible to succeed. The life of a Christian is not a power that stands on its own. If you think so, you have lost the right relationship between 'I' and 'him'. For then, almost imperceptibly, the emphasis falls on the 'I' and you are thrown back on your own resources. And then you may think, if I believe enough, I can do everything. But the emphasis is not on your faith, or on the strength you exert. The emphasis is on him! It can happen that, when you exert yourself to the utmost for that strength, he will seek to strengthen you precisely in it. It does not depend on human beings; it depends entirely on Christ. He does really make people strong in their weakness. He does that when Christians are persecuted, tortured, and burned at the stake, but also in sickness, suffering, and deep sorrow. Christ is sufficient for all circumstances, for all our possibilities and impossibilities. That is the gospel of the weak Christian and the strong Christ.

3. There Is Room for Grief

A boy, not yet 12 years old, died of a serious illness. His family was plunged in sorrow, their despondency was great, family life had become unrecognizable. And then the family received a card, a festive card. With all the balloons on it, it looked like a birthday card. But on the back it said: It is a celebration, for Jeremy is with God.

Conflicting Feelings

I am reporting the above event with mixed feelings, just as with the event described at the beginning. On the one hand it makes clear that the Christian faith is stronger than death and is able to cope with all grief (1 Cor 15:54-57). But on the other hand, it is so poignant and so painful. For the shroud of death has *not yet* been destroyed (Isa 25:7, 8), and because we still live in the shadow of death – although Paul does speak clearly about the future at the end of 1 Corinthians 15!

My purpose now is to point out that the joy of faith does not have to supplant the grief we experience. Besides, our faith is not yet perfect. We can be happy that our loved one is with the Lord (the promise), but that does not take away that wrenching grief (the fact).

To praise is also not the same as to be happy and elated. They *can* go together, but they don't need to. Your heart can focus on God, to seek him, to find your strength in him. And in that moment it is quite possible to experience grief, pain, and difficulty. When Job said, 'The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised' (Job 1:21), he had *first* torn his robe, shaved his head, and thrown himself on the ground. He poured out his heart to God. Praise directs the heart to God and seeks him sincerely, in the realization that you can always come to him and that he pays attention to you.

In his wisdom, the Teacher says that there is a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to weep and a time to laugh (Ecc 3:4). Open yourself up to share another's grief when the time comes. To hide from it or ignore grief betrays a lack of respect for the other person. To mourn for the other person signifies fidelity, loyalty to him. Think about David's poignant lament for Jonathan *and* Saul (2 Sam 1:17-27)! When life falls apart and there is disengagement, are we not allowed to feel pain? Everyone who loses loved ones knows how pitiless and cruel it is if there is no opportunity to express her grief. And the pain is pushed aside when you are made to feel that you should be done with it. But you bear the scars, day in and day out. Grief does not destroy, but builds up (Ecc 7:3). It is unnatural, in fact, unspiritual if no room is made for grief. God notices it, for he sees trouble and grief and takes it into his hand (Ps 10:14).

No Contrived Happiness

What is the Christian faith without joy? When Christians live joyless lives it has been said that they are atheists in practice, because they display a *de facto* denial of Christ's work. For being a Christian is not a gloomy affair in which everything is equally dark and bleak. The atonement calls for a bright red colour: Christ has made things right for you. The resurrection calls for a white colour: no power of death or grave can tear you away from Jesus. He gives meaning to your existence. He renews you day by day. He places a shining future before you. How then can it be that you are never happy with Christ? There is a problem if you are constantly acerbic, cranky, and embittered, because things are almost always wrong. Indeed, when you know that Christ has so much time for you and does so much for you, it is wrong that you are never happy in him.

Only, don't let anyone tell you that a Christian is *always* a cheerful person with a shining, laughing face. Yes, there is the illusory image of the Christian who always feels herself to be on top of the world. And that image is often attractive to a person who has endured a dreary life. But the chasm between that deeply dreary background and that joyful foreground is often immense. Typically, it hides an incapacity to feel happiness. The obligation always to exude happiness is a frightful thought. I have been told about children who scoffed at what they called the 'Pentecost-smile' of their parents, which they could no longer endure. For it was used as a mask to hide their deep grief.

The joy that the Bible wants us to display is most certainly not a contrived happiness, a condition that represses any difficulties and pushes all grief aside. It is something entirely different than always having to be a cheerful and upbeat person. Don't force yourself to be happy in that sense. It will just make your despondency worse. How could such compulsion ever be gospel? Your heart doesn't always feel happy, does it? I, at least, am glad that I do not *always* have to feel myself happy.

Joy in Christ

'Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!' (Phil 4:4). Paul is not being repetitive here. When he says, 'I will say it again', he means, 'I know what I'm talking about!' He wrote the letter to the Philippians from his jail cell and, humanly speaking, it would have been natural for him to weep

rather than to rejoice. He even thinks it possible that he will suffer sorrow upon sorrow because of his many difficulties and disappointments (Phil 2:27). But he is not speaking about a contrived, an unnatural happiness here.

For he says, 'rejoice *in* the Lord! The communion with or relationship to Christ is the foundation for permanent happiness. Paul is not speaking about a superficial happiness, but about a deep happiness that is grounded in the Lord. You don't have that happiness in yourself and it does not come from within you. You will only and always find it outside yourself in Christ. That joy is fixed in him. And especially when you face difficulties, Christ promises that it will not be taken away from you (John 16:22)! It is a joy in spite of tears. And so you can be intensely sad and yet feel joy. A joyful grief. Of course, Paul is not happy *about* the difficult circumstances in which he finds himself. But he rejoices that he has Christ in all circumstances. He knows himself to be joined to Christ. That is the joy of *faith*, knowing that Christ will not leave you.

4. Room to Complain

Can I complain? People don't want to hear about my problems. I don't dare to utter my complaints and difficulties. I was taught that when I was young: don't complain; just bear it and pray for strength. Should I complain, I shall undoubtedly be accused of not praying enough and not having enough trust. There's hardly any opportunity to give voice to my problems.

To Whom Can I Complain?

To whom can a person turn with his complaints? It sounds pious to say that you mustn't turn to God with them. Don't complain, but grin and bear it! And yet the Holy Spirit has approved the inclusion of all kinds of complaints in God's Word. The Bible even contains a little book called *Lamentations*, in which complaints are raised. The author applies them directly to God: He is 'like a bear lying in wait ... he dragged me from the path and mangled me ... He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust' (Lam 3:10, 11, 16). The complaints have their place in a relationship with God that is true to life. Didn't God hear the cry for help of his own people? (Exod 2:23). We honour him when we call upon him *in* the day of trouble and not just when we have escaped it (Ps 50:15).

We cannot imagine the Psalms either without the plaintive voice that appears in them. Many of the Psalms consist of or contain complaints (e.g., Pss 55:18; 64:2; 102:1; 142:3). Do we dare to utter our complaints to God? And do we give each other opportunity (room) to do that? It's all right to complain. A complaint relieves a heart that is burdened with grief. Of course, there are boundaries. Not every complaint is just or appropriate (Lam 3:39ff).

It is remarkable how the God-fearing Job cursed the day of his birth in the course of a long list of lamentations. That happened *after* his friends had patiently waited in silence for Job to speak (Job 3:1). Apparently, he thought himself in safe company and could therefore give expression to inner turmoil and grief. Job trod a lonely road in his daring, and sometimes provocative relationship with God. The road between 'why' and 'because' was a narrow one. He even made an appeal to God and puts God *on the defensive* (Job 16:19-21). He wrestled with God like no other person. Like the later psalmists, Job addressed his complaints to God. He did have to take back a lot of them (Job 39:37-38; 42:5, 6). But in the end God told him that in the difficulties he faced in his suffering, he had spoken *what is right* of God (Job 42:8). True, he cursed the day of his birth, but Job never gave up on God. In all his complaints, he held on to God.

Struggling with God's Failure to Right Wrongs

In the wisdom literature of the Old Testament you often hear believers speak of their difficulties with God's governance. The psalmist Asaph speaks of his difficulties with the prosperity of the wicked, a prosperity that contrasts with the problems faced by the righteous (Ps 73:3-12). In Ecclesiastes the brokenness of life is described as meaningless [vanity in older translations] (a puff of wind, fleeting, intangible, disappointing, bizarre). This is a cry of distress about a fallen humanity

(cf. Rom 8:20). But there is also so much that is broken and crooked that is directly connected to God: 'Who can straighten what he has made crooked?' (Ecc 7:13; 1:15). And God has made both good times and bad times (Ecc 7:14; 3:11).

Ecclesiastes also speaks about wickedness (Ecc 3:16, 17), loneliness (Ecc 4:7-12), and oppression because there is no comforter (Ecc 4:1). It speaks especially about the crooked situation in which righteous people find themselves despite their righteousness, while wicked people prosper despite their wickedness (Ecc 7:15; 8:10, 11). How can God let that crookedness continue?

Ecclesiastes is not the only book that addresses difficulties with God's governance. You will also find a striking example in Jeremiah. The prophet says, 'You are always righteous, O LORD, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?' Questions such as these are legitimate, so long as you respect that God is infinite and you are finite. Thus, you have to be mindful of your own boundaries and acknowledge your limitations. But you may speak to God about these things! You may turn to God in your bitterness and disappointment. Don't turn away from him.

Of course, it is true that God can still do miracles, for he can do much more than we can ask or imagine. But the fact that God leaves much crooked suggests that he wants to teach us to live with brokenness. It is not difficult to point out the fault lines in this life. Think, for example, about children who suffered emotional neglect, or even serious abuse. These things have marked them for life. Much healing is possible, but the scars remain. Think also of married couples who continue to struggle in their marriage, even though they feel themselves unhappy in the relationship. They tried everything to mend it, but it cannot be fixed. Someone else goes through life without a life partner, although she longs for one. There are parents who struggle with their children who, despite a faithful upbringing, have left the church. Yet another person has to cope with psychological limitations, or suffers from one of the many forms of autism. Or a person is struck with Alzheimer's disease and suffers humiliating consequences that are unstoppable. There is so much brokenness in the life of Christians, too much to make a complete list.

In very many cases you cannot trace back difficulties to human behaviour. 'Do not be overrighteous' says the Teacher (Ecc 7:16). So, as a reaction to the death of a righteous person, don't try to be *still more* righteous. Mysteries about life for which there are no explanations remain. It is wisdom or a life skill not to break your head about what is broken and to learn to live with what is imperfect (Jas 1:2-5). But it can also cause you to grow deeper in your living relationship with Christ (Col 2:7).

And Yet...

But when you undergo injustice and experience crookedness and you can't make the crooked straight, what then? What do you do then when you are burdened by it and suffer from it? Perhaps things are even worse. You have been subjected to gross injustice that is so totally unfair that it makes you ill. You would like so very much to have it corrected and made right. But you discover that this won't happen and that you will have to learn to live with it. That can be so difficult and it can last such a long time. Can a person carry on and live with that injustice, without becoming embittered and worn out? That is only possible if you give it over to God. He can handle all those crooked situations.

Ecclesiastes points the way for us. He says, don't be overrighteous (Ecc 7:16). As if you could get rid of those crooked circumstances by living in a more righteous and pious way. Or as if you should say, 'There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins' (Ecc 7:20). And don't pretend either that you know all the answers and can explain why something remains crooked (Ecc 7:16). But on the other hand, don't react in such a foolish and wicked way as to suppose that it no longer matters how you live and that you can even abandon God because of the circumstances (Ecc 7:17).

Fear God! Be in awe of him (Ecc 7:18). The Teacher's awe for God is poignant. It is the recourse for people who have many questions. They have to suffer much injustice. They have experienced crooked things in their lives and are still burdened by them. They can't make sense of things anymore. Is it then not beautiful that such people still hold God in awe? In Ecclesiastes they find recognition and acknowledgement, an emotional connection. No matter how much difficulty you may have with the way in which God directs your life, you *still* want to hold on to him. Fate doesn't determine things, but God does. I must expect all things from him. And I hold on to the fact that he governs all things.

To fear God, to be in awe of him, that can cause much suffering. 'Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God. Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them....' (Ecc 8:12, 13). That 'although' is characteristic of the fear of God. *Despite* everything, you hold on to God. In the middle of the complaints in Lamentations you find that sentiment back: 'Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."' (Lam 3:22-24). For in him I have all that I need.

5. Brokenness and Forgiveness

Forgive everyone, also the person who abused you. Know that the Lord is present. Invite him expressly to support you. Name the sin and the perpetrator. Speak your forgiveness out loud: 'Lord, I forgive ... for ... to me'. Help the other person to imagine that the sin and the evil have landed at the cross. And pray for healing where the sins have caused injury. It is really quite simple. By an act of the will, we articulate our faith in confidence, receive what we asked for, and thank God in advance for the response.

A Task

The ability of a Christian to forgive another person is a great strength. There is nothing more therapeutic than forgiveness. Nor is there anything that spoils things as much as an unconciliatory attitude. Forgiveness can emphasize in a beautiful way the unilateral love by which a Christian follows his Saviour. Forgiveness is not free of obligations. It is not a choice, but a commission (Eph 4:32). And no kind of misdeed is excluded from it. The Lord Jesus drew a connection between his forgiving us and our forgiving others (Matt 18:35). He wants to free us of all hatred, resentment, and spite. But be aware also that it is also a *prayer* that he placed on our lips. Indirectly we ask the Lord: make us willing to forgive others.

Forgiving as Soon as Possible?

Much can be said about the obligation to forgive each other. It depends on the situation in which you find yourself. I am going to restrict myself to discussing the idea that forgiveness must take place as quickly as possible; preferably as soon as possible, because otherwise you throw up a barricade that prevents you from experiencing God's presence. But does this idea take mercy into account? Because forgiveness is a process isn't it? It is often a very painful process for which much time is necessary. The time-honoured Heidelberg Catechism addresses this in such a movingly pastoral way when it explains the prayer for forgiveness: 'as we also find this evidence of your grace in us that we are *fully determined* wholeheartedly to forgive our neighbour'. When you are fully determined to do something, you have some room to act. Not that it leaves you free of obligations in the sense of: I'll do it at some point. No, you have determined to do it. You have chosen to follow this course and so you make a beginning of it. That demonstrates your inclination to forgive.

Forgiving is a process that certainly does not have to be carried out with undue haste. Because of the injustice that occurred, it is important for this injustice to be identified, given a name, and acknowledged. The Lord Jesus does that too (Luke 23:34). Further, there has to be an acknowledgement of the injustice on the part of the person who committed it (Luke 17:3). For it is

possible that that person will block the way to forgiveness because of a lack of guilt on his part (cf. Matt 18:21-35). And besides acknowledgement, the other person must also show a willingness to end the injustice. If the other person is not confronted, the injustice remains. Forgiving is also not the same as reconciliation. Reconciliation is always two-sided. Reconciliation can only take place when the wrongdoer has shown true remorse and is prepared to bear the consequences, and when the relationship can be restored.

The Scars Will Continue to Irritate

It is an act of mercy to give the other person much room during the process of forgiving, especially in a situation in which she has suffered serious harm. We can't just assume that we can continue in the same way as before. And we can't act as though nothing has happened. Forgiveness means a new, a different relationship with the person you forgave. When forgiveness has taken place, you move forward in a different way ... sometimes along a way that may be high on impassable. Forgiving is then two-sided. Together you make a new beginning; together you take on what happened and together you move on. It is an unbroken process that you undertake together. If things go well, the process of forgiving should promote and accelerate the process of forgetting. Only, there are things that are impossible to forget. That doesn't have to mean that you will always continue to harbour resentment or hatred. But deep wounds leave scars. It is possible to forgive even though things in your memory continue to irritate and cause pain. For us human beings forgiveness does not mean that everything must also truly be forgotten. God has not yet granted us that. But you can pray for that perfection! On earth as it is in heaven.

6. Longing for Wholeness

God the Holy Spirit awakens a longing for wholeness. He even groans along with us. It is not a groaning in despondency, but rather a groaning in expectancy. Creation is experiencing the pains of childbirth, not the pangs of death. The Spirit yearns for the birth of the new creation himself. God's Spirit longs more than anyone. He longs for a world in which the dark night of difficulties, pain, and worries is definitively past.

God's Spirit gathers all prayers before God's throne. Also the sighs in heaven: 'How long, Sovereign Lord?' He forges them into one. And it can be summarized as: Come! Come Lord Jesus! And God the Father, who searches the depths of our hearts, hears this prayer of his Spirit (Rom 8:27). He understands its intent. He discerns the intention of the Spirit. Will he not hear the prayer that conforms to his will? He will most certainly hear it. Our expectation of it is soundly based. God hears his Spirit irrevocably. The new world is coming.

Ultimately, wholeness is *the* gift of the future. It means complete restoration of everything that is broken. No one will be sick, weakened, worn out, or exhausted. The full restoration of human beings, spiritually and physically, will happen when God's kingdom makes its definitive breakthrough. 'There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain' (Rev 21:4). The leaves on the tree of life for the healing of the nations are living proof of it (Rev 22:2). And the most wonderful thing of all is this: 'God himself will be with them' (Rev 21:3)! He has put my tears in his bottle (cf. Ps 56:8 KJV, ESV) and will dry them one by one.

Faint with desire, I long to be
Where pilgrims join in celebration.
My heart and flesh with joyful shout
To you, the living God, cry out.

Psalm 84, end of stanza 1.

Questions for Discussion

1. In what way do you encounter the brokenness of this life?
2. We can groan about particular difficulties. Romans 8:26 speaks about the Holy Spirit, who intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. What do those groans of the Spirit mean for our connection to God?
3. What does Paul mean by the mystery: 'when I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Cor 12:10)?
4. Do you find room to express your grief within the church community?
5. Discuss the expression: don't complain; just bear it and pray for strength.
6. Does God intentionally let brokenness exist?
7. How do we follow the Lord Jesus in bearing the brokenness of life and in living with imperfection?
8. The Spirit longs for perfection more than anyone, but he does not reach for it beforehand. How is that possible?

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Translated by Albert H. Oosterhoff