

A UNIQUE SOLACE: TOUCHED BY THE FEELING OF OUR INFIRMITIES.

Introduction

We know that reading God's word is a wonderful source of strength and encouragement. Yet, at the darkest of times, in the midst of grief, anger, shock and incomprehension, we may find it difficult to do so. We can be surprised by our own reactions.

We may find it hard to hear verses quoted to us – we are likely to feel more grateful for the practising of scripture than for the quoting of it. Our faith is placed under severe trial.

The following thoughts and verses (mainly KJV and New KJV with one New RSV) look not only at some of the barriers we may experience when turning to God's word at such times, but also at a unique place of solace above all others.

Our Lord Jesus Christ knows suffering first-hand. He also knows everything we are going through. He has an intimate knowledge of all our thoughts, feelings and experiences, even when we could not begin to put them into words to another living being.

He is qualified to 'judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth' ¹ Why? Because he is able to discern – not by the sight of his eyes, nor by the hearing of his ears, but with righteousness. A righteousness that combines mercy and truth. He knows the truth of our situation. And he is touched with the feeling of our infirmities.

To whom shall we go?

In the midst of suffering or bereavement, we are grateful for every aspect of our Father's care, for prayer, for fellowship, for His will outworked in loving and practical ways. Some have the ability to speak the word in season that we need to hear, both apt and edifying, but there can be times when it is hard to listen to others' well meant words. We may ask in anger what can possibly qualify them to comment, although none of us can know the extent to which anyone else has or has not suffered.

We try to turn to God's Word of Life, longing for it to speak loud and clear to us, now of all times. We are not alone in that yearning, as we see in the Psalms ² and many other scriptures. With Simon Peter we exclaim, "Lord, to whom shall we go? *Thou* hast the words of eternal life" ³

However, in turning to the scriptures for support and guidance, we may be surprised to find that the greatest help may not lie in the passages to which we might first have turned in happier times.

¹ Isa 11:3, 4.

² Psalm 63:1; Psalm 77:1-12; Psalm 130

³ John 6:68

If thou hadst been here!

We know that the end of all sorrow is near but, whatever we know in theory, when suffering touches us deeply we hate what has happened, cannot understand and find it hard to see beyond it. We may find it very difficult to read the more direct scriptural principles regarding suffering.

We might normally have gained much strength from Hebrews 12; or from known instances where such principles have been lived out in the lives of those we know. Where a faithful brother or sister's patient example in suffering has genuinely borne fruit, sometimes years later, ⁴ where others have indeed turned to God through hearing of their example ⁵; or where others have undoubtedly been strengthened by that example to endure their own suffering ⁶

Or we might have taken comfort that those who have fallen asleep in Christ are at rest and without pain; or that no extra years in this life can be better than their years in the Kingdom will be. If that aspect does not apply to our particular circumstances, we may still have clung to the knowledge that there is soon to be an end to all sorrow, pain and death and to one of the greatest exhortations:

While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. ⁷

Tomorrow, the end of sorrow – but how can I move beyond today? In the midst of our present grief such valid consolations may not begin to reach us for a considerable time. In wording fitted to our own personal circumstances, how we might echo Martha's cry, "If thou hadst been here my brother had not died!"

The struggles of others

In previous times we might have gleaned much from considering the perseverance of Bible characters who have struggled through severe trials. David, ridiculed and rebuked by his brothers; suffering attempted murder; fleeing for his life; bereaved of his dearly beloved friend; his daughter raped; one son murdered by another; his family and his nation divided; publicly betrayed by his son; bereaved of that further son; defeated by temptation; struggling with guilt and shame; bereaved of his infant child... yet never losing sight of the fact that there is forgiveness with God and spending his last remaining energies guiding his children and preparing a house for the LORD.

Again, we might have thought on the life of Naboth, who, simply for serving God faithfully, was set on high, publicly slandered, ruthlessly stoned to death, his sons murdered with

⁴ Ecc 7:2;

⁵ Dan 12:3

⁶ 2 Cor 1:4

⁷ 2 Cor 4:8-18

him⁸... Or Jeremiah, rejected, hated by his family, exhausted, thirsty, starving, sinking in filth... Or Stephen, honest, full of faith and wisdom, his life cut violently short, cruelly murdered at the hands of an angry, vindictive mob... We will have read of Job's catalogue of sufferings; and of the many "of whom the world was not worthy"⁹

We can learn so much from these, but when we are utterly heartbroken it is possible that we may search the scriptures still, longing for something more.

Grief

Grief itself can be a barrier to drawing strength from God's word. We might have read wonderful passages of rejoicing or praise, which have in the past strengthened our vision, but from which, in times of grief, we turn painfully away. This reaction may disappoint and disturb us, and indeed can create a further sense of grief and loss! Yet it is with relief that we realise that our LORD fully understands this – "As he that taketh away a garment in cold weather, and as vinegar upon nitre, so is he that singeth songs to an heavy heart"¹⁰

Where then can we turn? We know that all scripture is given to *thoroughly* equip us. The Lord God has said that if we ask He will give wisdom¹¹. What greater need for wisdom do we have than now?

We are given hope in Gen 32:26. Here Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord, saying, "I will *not* let thee go, except thou bless me!" We hold fast to that precedent as we continue to wrestle both with our grief and with Gods' word, searching for help as we cast our care upon Him.

Anger

Grief is often mixed with anger. We may struggle with where we direct that anger, in response to suffering in our own lives or, often harder to bear, in the lives of those we love. We must be honest with ourselves and our Father about this, because it is the truth, and nothing is hidden. Otherwise we stumble on, denying ourselves the restoration, peace of mind, strength and vision He is able to give us.

"O Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compasses my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou

⁸ 2 Kings 9:26

⁹ Heb 11:38

¹⁰ Prov 25:20

¹¹ James 1:5

knowest it altogether... Search me O God, and know my heart, try me, and know my thoughts". (Ps 139:1-4, 23)

At Gethsemane, the Lord Jesus Christ did not deny his innermost feelings, but fully expressed them in prayer to his Father. Initially, he prayed in anguish for there to be another way:

“Abba, Father, all things are possible for you! Take this cup away from me!”¹²

Ultimately, he chose to accept his Father’s will above his own – because he was perfect, *and we are not!*

Thankfully, scripture also records the reactions of those who are not perfect. We are encouraged to see that after the extremity of Job’s wife’s angry retort, that Job should “curse God and die”, Job offered sacrifices and was given children, presumably with this same wife, and presumably indicating that her relationship with God had been restored. Job’s friends also, who had “not spoken that which was right”, were fully accepted again, through Job.

Whatever emotions we pass through, whatever retorts our pain leads us to utter, Christ offered himself to restore us to God, and “is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them”¹³.

Shock and Bewilderment

We can feel shocked, bewildered and deeply hurt, with a sense of great unfairness, not understanding when those we love suffer, even if they themselves accept it.

In New Testament times, Peter was freed miraculously from prison, yet James was murdered by Herod. Ecclesiastes warns us that in this present world “under the sun”, there is terrible unfairness. “There are just men, unto whom it happens according to the work of the wicked; again, there are wicked men, to whom it happens according to the work of the righteous”¹⁴.

We know that, although time and chance happens to all those described as “under the sun”, in contrast the wise “see the sun” and look towards an eternal inheritance. We believe the promise that, although they may endure the same trials as those under the sun, they are not at the mercy of time and chance but “the wise and their works rest in the hand of God”, whatever they endure¹⁵. Yet we can feel at a loss to understand their suffering.

¹² Mark 14:36, NKJV

¹³ Heb 7:25, NKJV

¹⁴ Ecc. 8:14, NKJV

¹⁵ Ecc. 7:11; 9:1,11

Peter had certainly “seen the sun” first-hand! Yet at the time, he could not comprehend God’s will in allowing Christ’s suffering and death. Later, he denied Christ openly and completely. How did the Lord Jesus Christ respond? While Peter was robustly denying him, our Lord, despite his own position – rejected, isolated, facing abuse, slander, torture and death – understood Peter’s struggle. When he looked across at Peter, we find no record of rebuke. He offered himself for all of us, including those who struggle just as Peter did. He turned to Peter, knowing his turmoil of mind, his conflict of emotions, and he turns to us.

Peter could not understand God’s will and purpose in the awful things that were transpiring. Events swept him along. He wept bitterly, he received no answers at that immediate time, though he would go on to learn how needful these things had been, (“that Christ should suffer – and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead”¹⁶). In the grief-stricken days that followed, Peter may have believed his relationship with the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ to be irretrievably broken. But this was not the end.

Jesus knew how hard it was for Peter, and knows how hard it is for us, to accept suffering and death or to feel our faith faltering in the face of them. Although faltering, Peter's faith remained. Upon his resurrection, the Lord mentions Peter specifically by name, calling him to follow his example in guiding and nourishing other lambs and sheep, many of whom were to face severe testing, just as Peter did, and would need strong reassurance that Peter, and Christ, genuinely understood.

Difficulty praying to the Father

It can feel hard to pray to our Father when He has just answered no, or not yet, to our most desperate prayers. We are all the more thankful that He has provided His Son.

Ecclesiastes urges us to “see the sun”. In Deuteronomy 5:5, with Moses foreshadowing Christ, Moses says, *“I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to show you the word of the Lord”*. As the Living Word made flesh, Christ is able to show to us His Father in ways that matter to us, in ways that make a practical difference to us.

What sets apart a prayerful meditation on Christ's life from other parts of scripture is not simply that he knew what it was to suffer, but also that he lives now, knows us intimately and knows the full details and extent of our own suffering. This is a unique solace, to which we shall return.

Healing and Saving

In Psalm 103: 3 and 4, God forgives our iniquities, redeems our life from destruction and, “heals all our diseases”. He directly links healing with forgiveness and redemption.

¹⁶ Acts 26:23

In Acts 28:27, we hear the Father's sorrow at the people's resistance to His permanently healing them all: "Lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should turn again – *and I should heal them*".

Christ spoke many words – taught, exhorted, encouraged, corrected – but what did he *do*? That we might know that Christ has power on earth to *forgive sins*, our Father sent him *to heal* – morning, noon and night.¹⁷ He was able to make people 'whole', 'safe' and 'sound'¹⁸.

The Father heals not only by sending Christ to save his people from their sins¹⁹ but also by promising that Christ, the sun of righteousness, shall rise *with healing* in his wings²⁰.

How we long for that sun to arise in its ultimate fulfilment and for Christ to heal now as he healed then – and more so. If only ... and many of us may weep bitterly for its delay. In God's longsuffering He continues to delay Christ's return for the purpose of saving yet more sons and daughters, from which delay we our own selves have benefited. The hour has not yet come.

Christ's actions revolved around healing, but they went much further than that. They culminated in addressing the root cause, rather than just the effects manifest in disease and suffering. Everywhere he travelled he met thousands desperate to be healed – and, for the time being, he healed them – until the hour of darkness, when he was taken and slain, and in his own death overcame the root cause of all that their, and our, griefs and illnesses represent.

He suffered, died, and rose again so that he could activate the cure that will soon be as visible as those new testament healings – and more permanent than any of them.

"Now being made free from sin you have ... the end, eternal life"
"...for if the son therefore shall make you free, you shall be free indeed!"²¹.

Christ's compassion in our suffering

The healing which God brings us through Christ is everlasting. It is not given lightly but at great cost. As we gain a fuller insight into Christ's suffering, we learn the extent to which his compassion for us was a large part of that suffering. We begin to understand the 'fellowship of suffering' and in our isolation and grief we begin to find a place of refuge in him.

¹⁷ Matt 4:24, Mk 1:34, Lk 4:40, 6:17

¹⁸ Lk 5:31, 32; 15:27

¹⁹ Matt 1:21

²⁰ Malachi 4:2

²¹ Rom 6:22, John 8:36

Christ was a man “of sorrows”²² - in the Hebrew, “of pains”. He was ‘acquainted’ with grief; the Amplified Bible reads ‘acquainted with grief and sickness’. The Hebrew means not a casual acquaintance but a thorough, deep knowledge, gained through experience. He wept over Jerusalem, knowing the suffering to come. How oft would he have gathered the people to him, as a hen doth her chicks, as a mother embraces her child. He entered into the suffering of others; it touched him deeply.

He knew the hearts of all. Healing, for example, the woman with the issue of blood, he would have understood her full situation, knowing she was unclean under the law, separated from her husband, excluded from worship, ostracised, in pain, afraid, lonely, isolated. As he healed her, he *felt* the virtue go out of him²³.

Every time he saw suffering and healed it, how much did it take out of him? We are told that “his visage was so marred more than any man; there was no beauty in him that we should desire him”²⁴. Seeing the sheep without a shepherd, he understood what their sin and suffering was doing to them and empathised completely with them.

When Paul, as Saul, had hounded and persecuted the believers, Christ had asked him “Why are you persecuting *me*?”²⁵. Years later, Paul wrote:

“We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced ... for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself... (we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead)”²⁶.

In Paul’s own affliction, he endured, knowing that the Lord Jesus identified deeply with his suffering, and, further, “*loved me and gave himself for me*”²⁷. Christ, after his ascension, as Paul knew, still felt and understood the afflictions of his people every bit as much as he had done. He has not changed.

Touched by the feeling of our infirmities – Psalm 38

Psalm 38 details David’s sufferings at the hand of Saul. Yet, through these, was David inspired to write the thoughts that filled Jesus’ mind as he carried our sins, bore our iniquities and healed us with his stripes? The psalm records the burden and chastening of sin: he was pressed sore; iniquities had gone over his head; he was troubled; bowed down; he went mourning all the day long. Intriguingly, it describes suffering in terms of the very illnesses Christ had countless times healed!

²² Isa 53:3

²³ Mark 5:30

²⁴ Isa 52:14, 53:2

²⁵ Acts 9:4, NKJV

²⁶ 2 Cor 1:8-10, New RSV

²⁷ Gal 2:20

The blind: “As for the light of mine eyes, it also is gone from me.” (v. 10)

The lonely, the persecuted, the isolated, the unclean: “My lovers and my friends stand aloof from my sore; and my kinsmen stand afar off.” (v.11)

Those who endure prejudice, hatred, injustice: “They also that seek after my life lay snares for me: and they that seek my hurt speak mischievous things, and imagine deceits all the day long” (v.12)

The deaf and the dumb: “I, as a deaf man, heard not; and I was as a dumb man that openeth not his mouth; I was as a man... in whose mouth are no reproofs” (v.13). We think of Christ's refusal to fall into the snares laid for him, or to be led into blasphemy or rebellious speech.

The halt and the lame: “when my foot slippeth, they magnify themselves against me. For I am ready to halt” (v. 16, 17)

Yet further diseases, having: “a loathsome disease and no soundness in my flesh” (Ps 38:7).

The psalm continues, “I am feeble and sore broken, I have *roared by reason of the disquietness of my heart*”. (Ps. 38:8)

How our hearts can silently roar in our heartbreak!

Our pain and grief can be indescribable – but there is no need to describe it to him because he already *knows*. He is touched by the feeling of my infirmities. It was for our sakes that in his heart he roared to the Father in his grief, then directed his remaining energies into overcoming the sin and evil which had first brought suffering and death into the world, the tragic effects of which he saw all around him and which we still suffer today.

To bring to remembrance

Not only does he know our suffering, but also he does not forget. The title of the psalm is “to bring to remembrance”. As weekly we remember our Lord Jesus and his sacrifice, so in this psalm it appears that he brings to remembrance, for him and his Father, his, and our, frailties, sorrows and pain – the sufferings of his people. He keeps these in remembrance. A memorial. We are not forgotten.

“Thou tellest my wanderings, put thou my tears in your bottle, are they not in thy book?” (Ps. 56:8).

The righteous shall be in everlasting remembrance (Ps 112:6).

And, lest this cause us to fear:

“This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord... their righteousness is from Me,” says the Lord” (Isaiah 54:17 NKJV).

Christ turned to his Father

In feeling his own suffering and the sufferings of his people, Christ turned to his Father. There could be no hiding his feelings from Him (as we saw in Psalm 139:1-4). Psalm 38 continues, “Lord, all my desire is before thee; and my groaning is not hid from thee. My heart panteth, my strength faileth me...”²⁸.

The psalm concludes quietly, with dignity. No human oratory. No professional gloss or image. No sophistication or worldly power. In his terrible anguish he held on to his faith. He simply “*followed the thing that good is*”, praying to God to be close to him and trusting God to save him.

“Forsake me not, O Lord: O my God, be not far from me. Make haste to help me, O Lord my salvation”. (Ps. 38:20-22).

For, “in thee O Lord do I hope. Thou wilt hear, O Lord my God”. (Ps. 38: 15).

In the Father’s hands

How does his Father respond? Speaking through Isaiah: “I have called you in righteousness, and *will hold your hand and will keep you*”.²⁹

Ecclesiastes reminds us that, whatever they endure, the wise are “in the hand of God”. The grief is that this and the ‘keeping’ that God speaks of here in Isaiah included His Son passing through death itself, for Isaiah’s verse continues, “I will *give you* for a covenant of the people...”

When our child is ill unto death, if we are able, we hold their hand, we hold them close. As Abraham and Isaac walked toward the place of sacrifice, they foreshadowed the bond between the Father and the Son, for “God will provide himself a lamb”, “so they went, both of them, together”.³⁰

Being in God’s hands did not preclude suffering, but God’s promise through Isaiah was to His Son as it is to us:

“Fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am thy God, I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with the right hand of

²⁸ Ps 38:9,10

²⁹ Isa. 42:6

³⁰ Gen. 22:8

my righteousness...I the Lord your God will hold your right hand, saying to you, Fear not, I will help you". (Isa. 41:10, 42:13).

In Deuteronomy, God through Moses sets before Joshua – in type, as He set it before the Lord Jesus – the future hope, the end of the matter:

“Be strong and of good courage, for you must go *with* this people to the land which the Lord has sworn to their fathers to give them and *you shall cause them to inherit it...* for, the Lord, He is the one who goes before you, He will be with you, He will not leave you nor forsake you, do not fear nor be dismayed, for” (despite all the failings and weaknesses of the people) “*you shall bring* the children of Israel into the land of which I swore to them – *and I will be with you*”. (Deut 31:7,8, 23, NKJV)

Our Father strengthened His son, with him in his suffering. To what end did our Lord Jesus Christ endure this suffering?

He endured to make possible the promised inheritance. He goes *with us*, to *bring us* to the land, *to cause us to inherit it!* He was strengthened to do this in the knowledge that *his Father went with him*. He desires us to know that even when the answer to our prayers, as it was to his, has been ‘No’ or ‘Not yet’, our Father is with us also.

In being touched with the feeling of our infirmities, the Lord Jesus not only offers a peace that the world cannot give, but is also ‘Emmanuel’: “God with us”, for it is the Father who sent him for us. He endured to bring us back to his Father.

Worry over motives as we look to the Kingdom

We may be longing for the kingdom in order to see again one we dearly love.

*"For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming?!"*³¹

"We are your rejoicing, even as ye also are ours in the day of the Lord Jesus..."

*Then you can be proud of us, as we will be proud of you on the day our Lord Jesus Christ comes again... Because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence... so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God."*³²

³¹ 1 Thess 2:19

³² 2 Cor 1:14; 4: 14, 15 - NCV & New RSV

Or we may simply be longing to reach the time when at last there will be an end to all grief and sorrow.

*“And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain...”*³³

Either way, we need not feel this is selfish. This is an expression of our faith, no matter how faltering that faith feels, at a time of severest testing. This is the joy set before us. It was, and still is, one of the joys set before our Lord Jesus, who suffered and died in order that “he shall see his seed, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand, he shall see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied, because he, my righteous servant, shall justify many”³⁴

To give us the kingdom is “the Father’s good pleasure”. The giving of salvation is “the joy of the Lord”. Nehemiah assures us that that joy of the Lord can wholeheartedly and legitimately be our source of strength as we press on towards it.³⁵

Thankful for solace

As we struggle with bereavement, grief, loss, anger, abuse, pain, fear or isolation, we find in Christ solace and empathy. In the most heartrending sections of the psalms our Lord Jesus Christ is alongside us. While those around us try to understand, and may succeed to differing extents, he too has suffered, and knows and understands every single thought and emotion we ever pass through. When I am overwhelmed, this is what I need to know. This is where I can take refuge and find rest. We are all different, but it may be that only from that starting point can I begin to draw help and strength from the rest of scripture, and draw nearer again to the Father.

In Jesus’ trust and dependency on his Father he leads us by example and draws us back to Abba, our Father, who sent him for us:

“Hear my cry, O God; attend to my prayer. From the end of the earth I will cry to you, when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For you have been a shelter for me, a strong tower from the enemy. I will abide in your tabernacle forever; I will trust in the shelter of your wings. (Ps 61:1-3)

Let us pray for one another, that we may find rest in knowing there is one who uniquely understands our circumstances and who is touched deeply with the feeling of our

³³ Rev. 21:4

³⁴ Isaiah 53:10

³⁵ Neh 8:10

infirmities. He knows what it is to *roar* by reason of the disquietness of his heart. He is risen. He knows us by name. He was sent by our Father, he shows us our Father and he leads us back to our Father, assuring us that our Father is with us. He lives today and with his Father brings to remembrance our sufferings. He gives us his example, that, despite our weakness and quite possibly through it, we might each help one another, until he come:-

“He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, the opening of the prison to them that are bound... to comfort all that mourn, to appoint unto them ... the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness (Isa 61:1-3)

“Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God” (2 Cor 1:4)

(Thoughts springing from loss and from a Bible Class on Psalm 38).