

SUFFERING & GOSPEL – Based on Matthew

PART I – Introduction

Why Suffering?

Some years ago I led many conferences on healing themes, and when I was speaking in Sweden, I felt the need to use the time away from home to have a look at suffering, to ensure that my teaching on healing was not getting imbalanced. In particular, I felt myself asking whether there were types of suffering for which there is no healing because they are in some way inseparable from **life**. By the time I had looked through Matthew I decided there most certainly were! This article is a summary of what I found: that there was a certain inevitability of suffering due to the nature of nine different things. I shall retain these nine things as headings. They are –

The nature of God, the nature of the Gospel, the nature of Discipleship, the nature of Christian Ministry, the nature of Others, the nature of Ourselves, the nature of our Choices, the nature of Evil, and the nature of the World.

What follows is not meant in any way to be a complete or exhaustive list. It is merely a *representative selection* to help us grasp nine particular facets of life which may be a trial to us, and from which our loyalty to Christ does not automatically shield us.

Why Matthew?

Simply because it is the first Gospel. I expected my examination of suffering to cover all the Gospels and Acts, but by the time I had reached the end of Matthew I had ample material. So I stopped!

Biblical References

Since this article is a summary of Biblical material I have chosen to keep the majority of references within the text itself.

Words or quotations directly from Scripture are *written in this style*.

Definition unnecessary

While folk will argue about what exactly we mean by *healing* or *wholeness*, I feel that while we might not be able to define it, we all know what *suffering is*. So I have looked at Matthew's Gospel and drawn out what would cause me suffering in the belief that most readers would substantially share my view of suffering and what may cause it.

Over 200 verses, that's the equivalent of over a **quarter** (or the first eight chapters) of Matthew are related to suffering. This ought not to have surprised me – but it did! The Cross, from which we derive the word '*ex-cruc-iating*', is at the centre of our faith. Many of the New Testament leaders were martyred. If much of the Gospels is about healing, much of them is also about suffering.

PART II – Suffering in Matthew's Gospel

1. The Nature of God

- Christ experienced the pain of God's *absence* when on the Cross (27:46). It was God's *proximity* that terrified the Apostles at the Transfiguration (17:6) and, at Christ's tomb, both the soldiers (28:4) where they shook and became like dead men, and the women (28:5) who needed to be told not to be afraid.
- The disciples probably found Jesus' graciousness irritating, when, for example, he welcomed the little children (19:13) and sided against them with the woman who anointed him (26:8).
- God is just and cannot be unjust. If we disown Christ he will disown us before his Father (10:33). The judgement demonstrated in Christ's Cleansing of the Temple (21:12-13) had always been an integral part of Jesus' teaching. This is shown in no less than five of his parables. [The Tares (13:42); the Unmerciful Servant (18:33-34); the Faithful and Unfaithful Slaves (24:51); the Talents (25:30); and the Sheep & the Goats (25:41).]
- God cannot forgive sin against the Holy Spirit (12:31-32).
- It is God, not the devil, whom we are to fear because he ***can destroy both body and soul in hell.*** (10:28). [It is God, not the Devil who alone has such powers. The original Greek does not name who it is, but says simply '*the*' = *the one*. The translations that regularly capitalise pronouns referring to God have *He* or *the One*, e.g. NKJ, NASB, Barclay, NIV. KJ21, but this only helps readers, not hearers. The CEV and NLT have *God*.]
- There is real truth in Jesus' claim not to bring peace, but a sword (10:34) and that following him will result in divided families (10:35). This is shown by the Nature of the **Gospel**.

2. The Nature of the Gospel

Following from suffering caused by the Nature of God comes that which derives from the nature of the **Gospel**.

- The Gospel invites persecution. Jesus predicted broken family relationships (10:35), and betrayal by loved ones (10:21). His followers would be ***hated by all because of my name*** (10:22). Jesus privately warned his disciples of future martyrdom (24:9).
- As a baby he was himself persecuted (2:13), and his cousin John was imprisoned and martyred (4:12, 14:1). Such persecution may affect those outside the Christian community as well as those in it, e.g. the innocent children – and their families – at Bethlehem (2:16), and Pilate's wife who said of Jesus, "***...today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.***" (27:19)
- Is there anything more painful than a mockery of our faith? "***He saved others, but he cannot save himself!***" was but one of the taunts that Christ suffered (27:39-44). The sources of such pain were both those who condemned him and those who suffered with him: ***The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.*** (27:44)

- Jesus in his parable of the Sower (13:18-23) has the stony ground representing *trouble and persecution* which arises on account of God's Word and causes a person to fall away (13:21).

3. The Nature of Discipleship

Sometimes, inseparable from suffering caused by the Nature of the Gospel is that caused by the nature of Christian **Discipleship**.

- It requires leaving behind our former life (4:20-22). To find our life we must first lose it (10:39, 16:25)! To follow Christ we must deny ourselves (16:24). Jesus added to this a phrase which must have caused the disciples' blood to run cold when they first heard it, but to which we have, sadly, become almost immune: everyone who would be his follower must *"take up their cross"* !!!! (16:24).
- *Reversal* characterises so much of Christian discipleship. We reach the topmost position via the pain and humiliation of being last (19:30, 20:16). We reach greatness via service – even, perhaps, unto death (20:26-28). The humility which should mark our discipleship will suffer the pain of turning the other cheek (5:39), being generous to those who steal from us (5:40) and going the mile extra to that demanded of us (5:41).
- Our love for Christ must take absolute priority – and to bring the point home, Christ says to one who would first bury his father *"Let the dead bury their own dead"* (8:22). Even the love of father and mother must be placed second to our love of Jesus (10:37).
- Peter had *left everything* (19:27) to follow Jesus. Jesus expects that following him could lead to leaving *houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields* (19:29). The fact that such sacrifice will be rewarded a hundredfold (19:29) and the disciple will inherit eternal life, does not much reduce this very real 'cost of discipleship'.

4. The Nature of Ministry

There is much 'cost' in Christian ministry. There is, for example, the pain experienced by the Shepherd, both in the wandering of the one, and in his having to leave the ninety-nine (18:12). There are the demands that sufferers make, e.g. the blind men (9:27-28) even follow Jesus indoors. While persistence of the Canaanite woman teaches us something about prayer, such 'importunity' may be a real burden to a pastor (15:22-28).

Christian service can be frustrated through the unbelief of others, as Jesus found at Nazareth (13:58). We can suffer ridicule as Jesus did when ministering to the synagogue leader's daughter (9.24).

The commonest suffering of ministry is **rejection**. The townsfolk beg Jesus to leave their area after his *successful* exorcisms (8:34) [Would they have invited him to stay if he had failed?!]. We can imagine the pain that lay behind Jesus' remark *"Prophets are not without honour except in their own country and in their own house."* (13:57).

[Mark shows that Jesus' suffering was even deeper, for he records that he was without honour *among his own kin*. (Mark 6:4). Matthew, writing much later, wisely saw no good reason to perpetuate the knowledge of that remark for later history, probably out

of respect for Jesus' family who were by then important Christian leaders. Least said: soonest mended.]

Jesus expects his disciples to suffer rejection also, and teaches them an amazingly therapeutic action to avoid the build-up of anger and resentment – which he probably used himself: when rejected by a home or town: “...*shake off the dust from your feet as you leave...*”(10:14).

[There was no real *Biblical* precedent for it (Nehemiah 5:13 is only a step towards it). Later disciples, like Paul and Barnabas, took Jesus' advice. Luke records. [they] *stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their region. So they shook the dust off their feet in protest against them, and went to Iconium.* (Acts. 13:50-51).]

5. The Nature of Others

a) Non Christians

Our Christian living does not remove us from the suffering caused by others, while it should give us divine aid in coping with it!

- Christ experienced deliberate testing from others, e.g.- the Pharisees and Sadducees came together to test him (16:1) The Pharisees came three times (19:3, 22:15, 34-35.), and once joined forces with the Sadducees (16:1).
- The Chief Priest and the Elders publicly questioned his authority (21:23).
- Among the greatest evils and suffering in Christ's life were the reactions of the Pharisees to his deliverance ministry to demoniacs (9.32-34, and 12:22-24). Their later demand for his death was simply a logical outcome of their earlier conclusion that “***By the ruler of demons he casts out demons.***”

[See the whole passage Matthew 12:22-32, which, importantly, gives the context for the 'sin against the Holy Spirit'.]

No words can ever express the pain Jesus must have felt; the pain of the utterly good being branded as the utterly evil; of Christ being branded anti-Christ. If he did not know already, he must have realised that such totally up-side-down thinking by his nation's religious leaders would inevitably lead to his death. In addition Christ suffered the sorrow of the true pastor who knows that when the devil distorts people's vision right to the very extreme of seeing that white is black, there is little hope of their being able to respond to any impulse to correct it.

- The behaviour of others will always grieve us, and Christ's Cleansing of the Temple (21:10-17) will have been traumatic for himself as well as others.
- As far as Christ's Passion and Cross is concerned, such suffering needs no comment from me. Its enormity is self-apparent. We must, however, make sure that our awareness of the physical agony does not eclipse totally other pain: the pain of humiliation (27:28-31) and mockery like “***He saved others: he cannot save himself.***” (27:39-43). How painful too is the casting of doubt on one's integrity and very being: “***If you are the Son of God come down from the cross.***”

Of course, as Christ experienced – and as we all know - Christians can be a pain too!

b) Christians

Human weakness is as apparent in the Church as outside it.

- When the disciples fail to grasp his teaching, one can sense Christ's frustration in chapter 16 with its “***Do you still not perceive? Do you not remember...How could you***

fail to perceive?”(vvs.9,11). They did not share his love of children (19:13). They misunderstood his appreciation of the woman who 'wasted' ointment by anointing Jesus (26:8), for which he had to rebuke them (26:10-13).

- Peter rebukes Jesus sufficiently for Jesus to see Satan working through him (16:22). Christ experiences division and jealousy among his disciples over James and John's future role in the Kingdom (20:24).
- When Christ most needed support, at Gethsemane, his friends let him down (26:40-45). Christ has the pain not only of knowing that the Shepherd will be struck down, but that his flock will scatter (26:31), and that his chosen leader will deny him three times in succession (26:34).

6. The Nature of Ourselves

- We differ from stones by being alive, and unlike them, being able to **feel**. We have the memory and the imagination to suffer the pain of anticipating our sufferings, and Jesus' predictions of his Passion (16:21, 20:17-19) must be placed among the greatest mental sufferings of the Gospel.
- **Com-*passion*** is to '*suffer with*' others. Such suffering frequently moved Christ to minister, e.g. to those who were *like sheep without a shepherd* (9:35-36) to feed the hungry four thousand (15:32), to cure the sick (14:14) and to heal the blind (20:34).
- Discernment of others rarely brings joy. *Jesus, perceiving their thoughts said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts?"*(9:4) and similarly Jesus was aware of the malice of the Pharisees (22:18).
- Humanity has the frustration of ignorance which even Christ experienced concerning the end of time (24:36). The disciples fear the storm because of their ignorance of Christ's Lordship over it (8:25).
- Joseph suffers embarrassment at Mary's pregnancy and the trauma of planning to break-off his relationship with her (1:19).
- The disciples suffer public humiliation and frustration when the father of the epileptic-demoniac report to their Master their failure to cure him (17:15/6). Christ's response is *"How much longer must I put up with you!"*

7. The Nature of our Choices

Our commitment to Christ and his Gospel brings, as we have seen, its own share of suffering, but just as we live with our good decisions, e.g. to follow him, so we also live with our mistakes.

- Those who choose to build their houses on sand may later regret it (7:26).
- Judas made the wrong decision and betrayed Christ, and couldn't bear to live with it. He hanged himself (27:5).
- Simon Peter denied Christ, and *wept bitterly* at his choice (26:75), though Matthew's Gospel does not record Christ's healing of Peter's wrong choice.

[see John 21:15-19, where Christ heals Peter's triple denial by evoking from him a triple affirmation of his loyalty.]

8. The Nature of Evil

The surprising thing is that so much of what I have labelled 'suffering' in Matthew and outlined above seems not directly to be the result of evil!

- The devil's main work, as Jesus found in the Wilderness, is to cast doubt and to try and divert us from obedience to God (4:1-11).
- According to Jesus' interpretation of the Parable of the Sower, the evil one *comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart* of the hearer when it is only shallowly planted (13:19).
- God's Kingdom is like a field of wheat in which an enemy has sown weeds. We have to exist side-by-side until God's harvest time (13:24-30).
- It is with our friends that our barriers are down, and so Satan readily – and mostly – uses those near us to divert us from the path God has chosen for us. So it is no surprise that Christ discerns Satan at work behind Peter's suggestion that he should avoid the *suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed*. (16:23) *"Get behind me, Satan!"* Jesus retorts.

9. The Nature of the World

The Christian no more escapes the troubles of the world than his Master did (indeed in our century the media bring world-wide troubles instantly to us).

- Jesus' exposition of his parable of the Sower shows his awareness of the negative influences of *trouble, persecution, cares of the world* and the *lure of wealth* (13:21-22).
- It was *many possessions* which ensnared the young man who left Jesus *grieving* (19:16-22).
- The signs of the 'End of the Age' have never been far from every generation of Christians: *wars and rumours of wars* (24:6), false leaders (24:4) international strife (24:7) and the *increase of lawlessness* (24:12).
- There is generally as little protection from such suffering caused by human nature as there is from the more unruly elements of nature: storms (14:22-32), *famines and earthquakes*. (24:7).

PART III – Conclusion

The conclusions we can draw from this sketchy look at Matthew are:

- Christian life will inevitably include various forms of suffering, but that Jesus knows, has been through them, and understands them.
- The Gospel is neither all pain nor all healing. There is pain and paradox in the Gospel.
- As we would expect, Our Lord catches the full reality in a nutshell –

In the world you will have to suffer, but cheer up! I have defeated the world.

(John 16:33, C.E.V.translation.)