



Grace in Times of Sickness

Hope for the present
and for the future

by Dr. John R. Galloway

Our lives have meaning and purpose, especially when we place all that we are and all that we do on the altar of worship.

Three years ago this very month, I walked out of the operating room and into the emergency room. I was short of breath, tachycardic, and had what we used to call at Grady the “weak and dizzies.” The right side of my face had begun to swell. I had just returned from a church medical mission trip to Peru and I thought that I had contacted some type of Peruvian “bug.” Unfortunately, as a dumb surgeon, I had already ignored the symptoms of fever, nosebleeds, and progressive malaise that were more consistent with my ultimate diagnosis of acute myelogenous leukemia. Little did I realize that a simple trip to the emergency room would turn into a year-long journey that included several rounds of chemotherapy, multiple long hospitalizations, staphylococcal pneumonia with empyema, bacterial embolism to my right eye causing temporary blindness, fungal cerebritis, venous thrombosis and gram negative bacteremia from my PIC lines, and finally an autologous stem cell transplant. Following my transplant, I developed auto-aggression syndrome (a type of graft versus host) resulting in a

severe skin rash over my entire body, that kept me itching and scratching for several months.

Before my personal suffering began, I surely agreed with the typical Christian checklist for the possible reasons for suffering:

- All things work together for our good and God’s glory. CHECK!
- Hardships increase our faith. CHECK!
- Suffering improves our character. CHECK!
- Being sick makes *heaven* more real to us. CHECK!
- Suffering makes us more sensitive to others who are hurting. CHECK!
- And so on...

Before my personal suffering began, I surely agreed with the typical Christian checklist.

But when the unexpected happened and the cancer was diagnosed, and the storm began to rage and the fire began to burn, all of these mental machinations left my heart cool, partially empty, and modestly comforted. Thus, I was confronted with the emotional problem of evil, and bitterness began to seep in. This was where loving friends and family and sympathetic compassionate physicians and nurses were so noble and so magnificent as they tenderly cared for me, and comforted me and walked with me through this *Valley of the Shadow*, as I struggled with the various philosophical and theological questions common to many in such circumstances, and learning some very important lessons in the process:

Dr. Galloway is an Associate Professor of Surgery, and the Director of Nutritional Metabolic Services at The Emory Clinic in Atlanta Georgia. He and his wife, Sharon, have two daughters.



Suffering's Answers Converge in a Person

Looking back now, however, I have come to know that the ultimate answer to my personal suffering, as well as to the problem of evil, is not a philosophy or even a well-honed theology, but a Someone, a blessed assurance, a strong deliverer. In particular, I have come to view my Jesus and His passion and His Cross in a much more personal sense. Over time, I have seen the following parallels:

- I had headaches from multiple micro-brain abscesses and partial blindness in my right eye from bacterial embolism. Jesus had a crown of three-inch thorns thrust on His sacred head, making it, as the hymn says, despised and gory.
- Bone marrow stimulants gave me severe bone pain in my legs, hips, and shoulders for which I received generous doses of narcotics. The bones of Jesus were pulled apart at the joints as He hung on the Cross, causing tremendous pain and agony.
- My auto-aggression syndrome caused an itchy and painful rash, for which I received steroids, antihistamines, and soothing skin protectants. The skin and muscles of Jesus' back were literally ripped to shreds by the "cat of nine tails" swung by the Roman lictors, leading to massive blood loss and hemorrhagic shock.
- My right-sided pleural effusion due to staphylococcal pneumonia was carefully drained by a chest tube that was placed with ample amounts of Lidocaine. A Roman soldier ruthlessly thrust a spear into the side of Jesus, piercing His lungs and heart, causing water and blood to flow from His pericardial sac and failed heart.
- I required multiple IVs and PIC lines in my arms for medications placed by caring hands, using local anesthetics to dull the pain. The hands and feet of Jesus were nailed to the Cross with six-inch spikes, either piercing the bone or rubbing against the sensitive periosteum, causing excruciating pain.

- I received multiple blood transfusions for my anemia and low platelet counts; all carefully matched to prevent transfusion reactions. Jesus had hemorrhagic shock from the intense flogging, making it difficult to stand, let alone walk the Via Dolorosa carrying the cross, the instrument of His death.
- The chemotherapy I required produced anorexia, muscle wasting, and significant weight loss, for which I received specialized intravenous nutritional solutions filled with proteins, calories, vitamins, and trace minerals—all monitored by one of the top nutritional support teams in the world. Jesus, when He was thirsty on the Cross, was given only a sponge soaked in sour wine and made further undrinkable by the bitter herbs mixed with it.

- My pneumonia caused me to become short of breath and hypoxic, but I was given oxygen, bronchodilators, diuretics, and antibiotics to help me breathe better. Jesus ultimately died on the Cross after six hours of tortuous suffocation as He attempted to exhale by pulling on the nails in His hands and pushing on the nail through His feet. I can only imagine the intense pain caused by such efforts to breathe as well as by His raw, shredded back rubbing against the coarse wood of the Cross
- I was constantly surrounded by my loving family and friends and consummate, caring physicians and nurses. Jesus' friends either betrayed Him, denied Him, or deserted Him and He was left surrounded by His Roman executioners and taunting, disbelieving crowds.
- Throughout my illness, I was shown great love not only because of what I have accomplished in life, but because of who I was, notwithstanding my imperfections and past sins. Throughout His trial and crucifixion, Jesus experienced tremendous, unmerited hate even though He had healed the sick, caused the lame to walk, the blind to see and had given hope to the poor, all the while showing the way to God and righteousness. He was hated and condemned not because of what He did, but because of who He said He was—*the Messiah, the Son of God, the great "I Am."* Even though I was sometimes frightened and my convictions were shaken, I never once felt abandoned by my Heavenly Father. But my Jesus, on the Cross, in a way that I can never humanly comprehend, suffered the ultimate agony of separation from His Father as God poured out His justified fury upon His Sinless Son. The crimes of all humanity for all time, vast and immeasurable, were taken by Jesus upon Himself as if He alone were guilty of them all. And near the end of His precious innocent life, Jesus cried, "*My God, my God! Why hast thou forsaken me?*" so that I and all who trust in Him would never, ever have to say these words!

Suffering Connects Us to His Unfailing Love

Famed hymn writer, Annie Johnston Flint, was orphaned at an early age. Soon thereafter, she developed rheumatoid arthritis that twisted her body and wracked her with pain and ultimately left her bedridden and incontinent. Cancer began to devour her body and blindness crept in. Alone, in pain, and blind she wrote the words of a hymn—"He Giveth More Grace"—that both astounds and amazes us:

The ultimate answer is not
a philosophy or a theology,
but it's a *Someone*.

*He giveth more grace
as our burdens grow greater,
He sendeth more strength
as our labours increase;
To added afflictions
He addeth His mercy.
To multiplied trials
He multiplies peace.
When we have exhausted
our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed,
ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end
of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving
is only begun.
His love has no limits,
His grace has no measure,
His power no boundary
known unto men;
For out of His infinite
riches in Jesus
He giveth, and giveth,
and giveth again.*

Such words defy the secular, humanistic framework. Nowhere in any other worldview or religion is such wondrous, magnificent, even supernatural love manifested towards you and me. Ultimately our response to suffering is parallel to the contrarietal responses of the two thieves crucified on either side of Jesus. One thief experienced unyielding despair and hate, and blamed God for his human condition, and, while cursing God, taunted Jesus to save Himself and them. The other thief recognized his own personal evil as his responsibility and that he was justly condemned. At the same time he remarkably recognized the innocence of Jesus. And in so doing, he asked Jesus to remember him when Jesus came into His kingdom, to which Jesus

amazingly replied, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

Suffering Leads Us Toward His Joy

If the *Christian Story* is true, and I believe with all my heart that it is, then we are God's children, created in His image and, therefore, we are endowed with infinite value, dignity, and worth. We are given hope for the present and for the future; for as we acknowledge the loving sacrifice of Jesus and accept his Lordship over our lives, then we can experience that incommensurable good of knowing God and enjoying Him for all eternity.

But for now while we are living our lives here on this imperfect earth and experiencing the oft-times frustrating mixture of happiness and blessing with evil, pain and suffering, we do not lose our joy because God is our Father and He gives to us His Holy Spirit to abide with us and in us. We know as His children that we can cry, "Abba," "Father," even "Daddy, I hurt" and He allows us to crawl up into His lap and He enfolds us with nail-scarred hands and He brings us close to His spear-pierced side, and He gives to us the comfort, strength, and peace to withstand the day until we hear those most wonderful words from His precious lips, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter into the Joy of your Lord!" This joy, so singular, is so indescribable that it causes the Apostle Paul to write, "*For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all*" (2 Cor. 4:17). Paul also quotes the prophet, Isaiah, "*No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him*" (1 Cor. 2:9). *f*

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