

Chapter 5

Tests of faith

Perhaps many of us have had times when we privately thought that if God is there and cares about us at all, he had got it wrong. His promises seem to have been put on hold for so long that we begin to think that our hopes were based on no more than a vivid imagination.

Jacob's descendants felt like that. They had moved to Egypt from Canaan, the land God had promised to give their forefathers, at a time when to stay there might have meant death by starvation. Joseph's important position and his coming to their rescue had seemed miraculous, but now many years had passed, Joseph had died and his influence had died with him. They were still in Egypt and even worse, they were being abused as slaves instead of being free to go back to their original homeland. It is not surprising that they grumbled, but what about God's repeated promises to make of them a great and blessed nation, based on far away Canaan? Again they had to learn to wait for God's perfect timing, as all of us need to do.

Waiting for God's good time

Today, displaced or trafficked people in different parts of the world share the same kind of misery as that of the captive Hebrew slaves. The story of their eventual liberation may inspire hope for other sufferers. The second book in the Bible is named Exodus because it tells the story of Israel's final departure, or exodus, from Egypt. After all, God had not forgotten his promises to bless them. Their miraculous story must encourage other downtrodden people not to lose faith in him, even when greatly tempted to do so.

We have already seen in Abraham's life story the difficulties that followed when he stopped trusting God's promises and tried to hurry things along by himself. The whole nation of Israel was about to learn Abraham's lesson, for learning to wait on God is the recurrent experience of all who continue to believe in his care.

Release from slavery

In the end, the desperate prayers of the Hebrew slaves were heard above their persistent grumbling and God answered by sending them a man named Moses. He would become a great leader, but is introduced to us as a child at risk of being murdered. He was the baby of a Hebrew woman and cleverly hidden away from a cruel despot only to be discovered and brought up by that despot's daughter. To outward appearances he became an Egyptian of the royal household, but grew up holding to his ethnic origins, going so far as to kill an Egyptian who was beating up a Hebrew slave. To escape further trouble he fled the country. He was in exile for 40 years before God spoke clearly to him – another lesson in patience – and what he heard came as a huge surprise.

Moses and his brother Aaron were told to go together and ask Pharaoh, ruler of Egypt, to release all the Hebrew slaves. What a job description! Understandably, Pharaoh immediately refused to send off his whole workforce. Instead he made the slaves work even harder, so adding to their misery. Yet all of them reckoned without the love and power of God to free his people. Nine plagues troubled the Egyptians but spared the Hebrews. Although each followed naturally on the others, their timing and increasing impact were miraculously under God's control. Professor Sir Colin Humphreys, a distinguished scientist, explains the natural sequence of the ten plagues without any doubt about God's orchestration of them on behalf of his people.¹

The ten plagues

In obedience to God's instruction, the first plague came when Aaron's staff was raised over the River Nile. The water instantly became polluted with either a surge of blood-red earth or a scum of red algae, killing the fish and causing hundreds of frogs to escape to land. They even invaded Egyptian bedrooms and beds before they died, when heaps of their decaying bodies attracted plagues of gnats and flies. They were likely to carry infections that next affected animals and humans in turn. After those five plagues came three more: a violent hailstorm, a huge swarm of locusts and possibly a severe dust storm producing thick darkness. All these nine plagues affected the Egyptians

but spared God's people. Although Pharaoh almost gave in several times, he hardened his heart again between plagues, firmly refusing to let the Israelites go until hit by the last and worst plague of all.

Before sending this tenth affliction, the Lord had directed all Hebrew families to sacrifice a spotless lamb and paint some of its blood on their doorposts. Then, safely indoors, they were to eat a hot meal of roast lamb while dressed for travel. That night the Lord would see the bloodstains and pass over their homes, but the eldest sons of Egyptian families would all die in their unmarked houses. The name 'Passover' is still used by Jews for the annual remembrance of that extraordinary night and the exodus that followed. Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron in the night, and ordered them to take the whole company of Hebrews out of Egypt.

The events of the Passover are a picture of Christ's sacrificial death to bring about our salvation.^{2,3} More on that later, but for now it is worth reading in the first chapters of Exodus the whole drama of the release of the Hebrew slaves, led by Moses and Aaron. Parts of the story are upsetting because it is hard for us to think of so much suffering, until we see that it tells how God is able to release his people from enslavement and deal with cruel and godless oppressors. He will not tolerate evil forever. Even as the slaves were escaping, Pharaoh's army went after them as far as the Red Sea, intending to bring them back to Egypt. Instead, the waters withdrew (as they do before a tsunami) allowing the Hebrews to cross on relatively dry land before the returning wave drowned all the pursuing Egyptians.

From gratitude to grumbling

The excited slaves went on their way, led by Moses and Aaron. Moses had lived in the desert but relied on God to direct the way they were to go. He did this by providing a cloud that moved before them by day and a column of fire by night. They moved on as the cloud and fire moved and stopped when they stood still. Stage by slow stage they went on through the wilderness. Their supplies ran out but God delivered daily a fresh but very basic supply of strange sweet food called manna and he led them to sources of water.

Yet only a few weeks after leaving Egypt, the people started to grumble. The discontent was directed at Moses but was really rebellion against God. They forgot about the slave labour, the cruelty, the miracles of timing that had led to their escape and the way that God was still guiding and providing. They spoke of longing to be back in Egypt to have a better diet. They even missed their garlic! ⁴

Grumbling can be infectious and it spread throughout the community. Their endless ingratitude must have hurt Moses, who was doing his best to obey God and lead them on a journey that was very hard for him, too. The people's discontent finally boiled over into threats to kill him, all his patient care ignored.

Questioning God's care

The excitement of the exodus was over and life no longer had an ordered pattern, however harsh it had been before. In our own lives, things can sometimes change overnight and the way ahead is no longer as clear as it was. Even after knowing a good life we, too, can undergo a wilderness experience of discomfort, doubt and dryness. Psalm 23 reminds us that after enjoying green pastures we may arrive in dark valleys. But the Psalmist assures us that we are never alone, for God's presence and comfort will help us to come through. We are not left in the dark forever if our trust is in him. It is all too easy to grumble when the way is hard, forgetting that earlier good times were not ours by right, but God's gift.

The fact of human suffering prompts many people today to doubt that God cares – or that he exists at all. There is no easy answer to the cry, 'Why, if there is an almighty God, does he allow so much pain?' The question sometimes opens up a search for God, while those who know him gradually learn to hold on to him in trust in spite of natural distress, later to find that he had supported them throughout.

Blaming God for human suffering

Most people in the developed world never experience the serious suffering that is often an everyday part of life for so many elsewhere.

Those better off may never stop to think or to thank. When trouble comes they too readily blame someone else, from the doctor who missed a diagnosis, to the God who could have arranged things better.

It has to be admitted that on a world scale, much suffering still follows the neglect by a few of the needs of the many. We could cite the armed conflicts that kill or injure civilians as often as those on the front line of battle. The widespread destruction of rainforests may create wealth for some, but drought, desert and even death for others. Much domestic, national and even international grief is man-made. Closer to home, we can hurt ourselves and depress others by constantly grumbling over smaller issues.

Failure to link cause and effect

It is known to the medical world that some serious disorders of health are likely to be self-induced, often (but not always) following an unhealthy lifestyle. I recall an autopsy demonstration in Uganda when the extensive cholesterol plaques in the large arteries of an American tourist were in striking contrast to the smooth aortic lining of a Ugandan of similar age. Their past diet and levels of stressful activity had been very different and probably their blood pressure levels, too. One had died on safari of a heart attack and the other of the blood disorder, sickle cell disease.

In extreme cases, obese or chesty people have been refused surgery until they lost weight or stopped smoking. We should not blame God when we have ourselves to blame. Yet behind the compulsive eating or smoking can be the deeper problem of an unhappy life.

Of course, painful questions remain. Why should a beloved young child be killed in a road accident, or why should the mother of a large family develop a neurological disease that stops her being able to care for them all? There are no easy answers, but we can be sure that God's love is still there to give relief and strength to those who turn to him.⁵ We can never say that God does not care when we recall that by his death his Son took upon himself the burden of our sicknesses and sorrows as well as our sins.⁶

Unrecognised spiritual illness

Not frequently diagnosed, though equally widespread, is the spiritual malaise experienced in modern as well as ancient societies. This was at the root of the Hebrews' problem – they were not living according to the Maker's instructions in the trustful and loving relationship with him for which he had made them. Today, as then, this sickness of the soul can present with emotional or physical symptoms. Someone with deep understanding may be able to identify the basic problem and point the way to forgiveness and health.

A junior doctor with this gift of insight was able to help two of his women patients by taking a detailed history. He then noted the coincidence for each of them that the onset of symptoms coincided with the date of a previous abortion. One had suffered years of depression before attempting suicide and the other suffered from chronic joint pain but, in answer to a sensitive question, each believed that the abortion had been the start of her troubles. Each woman needed to know release from her burden of guilt. Sadly, the hospital's fast turnover meant that they were lost to follow up by that very busy doctor. Perhaps experiencing his understanding had helped them to recognise and voice the connection and so been therapeutic. In addition, though, they needed to know forgiveness and complete healing of their inner wounds.

Just as putting a sticky plaster over a deep cut is likely to hide but not heal it, so to try and control symptoms by repeated prescriptions can cover up the deeper nature of a problem. Someone I know took his mother to see a specialist about a new onset of back pain. As well as examining her for other causes, the wise doctor asked if she had recently had any personal trouble. In fact she had lost her husband only a few weeks before and was carrying new burdens. Body, mind and spirit are so inter-related that when one suffers, all suffer. It is good when doctors are able to recognise this and practise what has been called 'medicine of the whole person'.

Finding strength to go on

Later on in their journey, the Hebrews would repent and turn back to

God, even if they still tended to return to their own wilful ways again and again when things got difficult. Without neglecting the root cause of a problem, we are also invited to keep trusting the pain of it to God. It may not go away, but he will help us to bear it.

The husband of a woman known to me has a degenerative neurological disease and is slowly deteriorating mentally. He is unable to do much for himself and no longer able to speak, though not evidently unhappy. His wife told me how sometimes she sits and weeps but added, 'Underneath it all I can feel the love of God closer than ever before'. She often finds this love channelled through the kindness of others who help to support them in the suffering.

The Hebrew wanderers would have found less to worry them if they had only resolved to keep on trusting the God who had freed them from slavery. In Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy 5, the record tells how through Moses, the Lord called the whole company to a solemn public meeting at the foot of Mount Sinai. They obeyed, but were scared by the smoke, fire and trumpet blast, which God used to signify his presence. They did not see God but heard his voice announcing his first Ten Commandments. By this time they were so frightened, that although God had more to say he sent them back to their tents. Only Moses would hear the rest.

Instead of remembering that Moses' leadership depended on God's leading him, the people lost heart when he was called to climb further up Mount Sinai. They had no idea when, if ever, he would return. Unknown to them Moses had gone to meet God and hear more of his rules for life. Because they had not yet learned patience, they decided to look for a different leader. Big trouble would follow that decision.

For further thought

- Are you learning to think that illness may have other causes than are obvious?
- Is it easier to complain than to remember good things and be thankful for them?
- What lessons can we learn from the Old Testament stories we have thought about?

Further resources

- Tournier P. *Guilt and Grace*. Crowborough: Highland Books, 1986.

References

1. Humphreys CJ. *The miracles of Exodus*. London: Harper Collins UK, 1974
2. 1 Peter 1:18-19
3. 1 Corinthians 5:7b
4. Numbers 11:4-6
5. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10
6. Isaiah 53:4-5