

BELIEVING IN SUFFERING

One of the places we went on our recent vacation was the Field Museum in Chicago. One of the things we saw there was a really well- done presentation on the fall of Pompeii. As with most museum displays there was a gift shop near the exit. Barbara and I stopped at the register there and had a very pleasant conversation with the sales clerk there. She knew a good bit about the Pompeii eruption. After 10 or 15 minutes, we finished the conversation and moved on to the next venue.

A few days later Barbara and I celebrated our birthdays- you see, our birthdays are on consecutive days. So, our family gathered around as Barbara and I opened our presents. When I opened my present from Laura, there was a book in it. It was a book on the eruption at Pompeii. Apparently, Laura had bought the book from the woman that Barbara and I had spoken with at the gift shop in Chicago. As Laura was purchasing the book, she pointed me out to that woman and said, "Please don't sell this book to that man right there."

The book is entitled Ghosts of Vesuvius by Charles Pelegrino. The book actually offers some insight into the science, history and archaeology of the eruption. I haven't finished it yet, but so far, I've really enjoyed reading it.

The nearby town of Herculaneum met it's end even before Pompeii did. They were buried by what's called a pyroclastic flow. If you don't know what that is, imagine a wall of gas and mixed volcanic material: volcanic glass and ash mostly. It's about 1,800° Fahrenheit and it's moving downhill towards you at an average speed of 60 mph.

That was the fate of the people of Herculaneum. For roughly twelve hours as the volcano erupted, Herculaneum lay largely untouched. They could feel the earth shake, hear the mountain roar, and see the column of smoke ash, but since the city lay upwind of the mountain, they escaped largely unscathed. But what goes up, must come down. All that material that was ejected up into the atmosphere fell back to Earth as a pyroclastic flow. When the end came, it happened swiftly. The people of that doomed city had only a matter of seconds- at most a minute or two- to contemplate their doom before it arrived. Like Pompeii, Herculaneum was a port city on the Bay of Naples. Many of victims were found in buildings close to the city docks, waiting for rescue ships that would never come. There would be a total of 6 pyroclastic flows during the eruption, burying Herculaneum to a depth of 65 feet- so deep that a generation later, nobody could remember where it had been. A century later nobody even remembered its name.

Pompeii had a different fate. Pompeii was farther away, but it was downwind. Only the last three pyroclastic flows covered it and only to a depth of 12 feet, but during the course of the eruption, it was covered in a blanket of Pumice. Pumice is volcanic rock. It's extremely lightweight- so lightweight that it falls like snow. But even snow can be damaging if there is enough of it. During all those long hours so much fell that it collapsed roofs and suffocated some of the inhabitants.

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Some of the stories in the book are academically fascinating; some of them are exciting; some of them are tragic. In the latter category are stories about individual victims of the eruption, mostly reconstructed from archaeological evidence. In one house in Pompeii, two skeletons are found with their fingers entwined. Nearly two thousand years later, the science of DNA will identify them as father and son. They appear to have died simultaneously, each gasping for their last breath as they gazed at the other.

In another part of Pompeii, a dog appears to have been chained to a post. As the volcanic material rained down, the dog climbed the ever-growing mound of pumice until it was buried and suffocated. There are more stories like these: a group of men who tried to hide beneath an overturned boat, the skeleton of a pregnant woman with the skeleton of her unborn child still nestled between her ribs, the remains of a young girl- probably a nanny or older sister- trying to shelter a small child beneath her own frail body, the remains of man who was locked in a room within a local temple- archaeologists believe he was held captive there. The tales go on and on. The scale of suffering was immense.

The story of Pompeii and Herculaneum is just one disaster story in our history, of course. The eruption was more powerful by far than the atomic blast at Hiroshima, and yet far fewer people actually died there. In addition, the atomic blast was not a natural phenomenon. Warfare is just one type of suffering that humanity visits upon itself. Yet, like all disasters, the story of Pompeii brings up a theological question. How are we to understand the grace and love of God in presence of such monumental suffering?

This is not an idle question. This question has confounded theologians throughout the life of the church. It even has a name in theological circles; it's called theodicy. Whole books have been written on the subject. In at least one case I know of, a prominent biblical scholar became an agnostic, because he couldn't accept that a beneficent, graceful, loving God, could permit such suffering.

When I was a student at Columbia seminary, we were required to write a paper for one of my classes. We were required to choose a theological topic, research what the scripture had to say about it, and develop a conclusion supported by the scripture. Our topic had to be approved by the instructor, so I told my professor I wanted to tackle the question of theodicy. He said, "Sure, you can write about that. If you solve that one, you will have a long career as biblical scholar." Since you see me here, standing in front of you now, you can guess how well I did on that topic.

For centuries, humans have been asking this question, going back into the scripture itself. One answer that has been proposed is that suffering is the result of sin. There is even a

hint of this in the scripture. In the book of Job, Job is advised by three friends. One of them tells him that his suffering must be the result of his own sin. He is advised to think about what he might have done. In the Gospel according to John, Jesus and his disciples encounter a blind man. The disciples ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

The truth is that there is some biblical support for this point of view in the scripture. The towns of Sodom and Gomorrah, for example, are destroyed because of their sinfulness. However, just as often, this view is unsupported. The text makes it clear that Job's suffering is not because of his sins. Jesus tells the Disciples that the blind man wasn't blind because of his sins. He does, however, offer another explanation.

Jesus tells his disciples that the man was born blind so that the works of God may be displayed in him. In other words, he could serve as a sign of the power of God to heal. That's a comforting answer, until you realize that the man probably spent years as a blind man, until Jesus came along to heal him, all so that the power and majesty of God could be displayed. I don't wish to question the motives of the Triune God. I believe in his grace and mercy. I'm simply saying, that Jesus' answer doesn't satisfy my need to understand. It doesn't adequately answer the question that I have.

Other answers to this question have been given by theologians. One common answer is that suffering is the result of God's testing us- that when we find ourselves in the midst of a painful situation, we should ask ourselves if there is something in that experience that God wishes us to learn. Certainly, there's some support for this in the fifth chapter of Romans, where it says we should exult in our suffering because it ultimately builds character, which leads to hope.

Another common answer is that in all things God works for good; we may be suffering now, but this is going to lead to something even better in God's providence. All of these explanations have some biblical support; all of these explanations can be supported with anecdotal evidence, but truthfully, none of them seems truly adequate.

Consider the story I told of the mother and unborn child recovered in shadow of Mount Vesuvius. Why did such a terrible thing happen? Did that child sin? Surely, not! The child was yet to be born. Did the child suffer because of the mother's sin? That's hard to accept. Were they killed that the power of God might be displayed? If so, the message was lost for nearly 2,000 years. Were they killed as a test? If so, a test for whom. It's unlikely anyone they knew ever learned what happened to them. None of those answers seem adequate.

But if there is one answer that the Bible gives that does give me some peace about this, it's this passage hear. Paul doesn't try to explain why suffering happens. He just acknowledges it. Yes, it's happening. We all suffer at some point in our lives. But Paul points us towards a future. He says, "For I consider that the sufferings of the present age are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation

waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ¹

Suffering happens. I don't know why it happens. Apparently, neither did the Apostle Paul. Frankly, I'm not sure it would give me closure if I did understand why it happened. But I'm left with a conclusion. We have a choice as to how we deal with not knowing. We can choose to reject the Word of God because of it. We can even deny the existence of God. To me, neither of those is a satisfying answer. They don't answer the question; they leave it unanswered. Furthermore, they arise from flawed logic. Just because suffering exists, that doesn't mean God doesn't care. It also doesn't mean that God doesn't exist.

Paul offers me a better solution. Rather than trying to focus on why we suffer, better to place one's hope in a future that is in the hands of a merciful and gracious God. I don't know why we suffer, but I choose to hope that God will set us free. I choose to keep believing in the midst of suffering. That offers me more comfort than anything else I have heard.

¹ Holy Bible: New American Standard Bible (NASB) (p. 2883). The Lockman Foundation. Kindle Edition.