

Virtuous Living through Suffering and Loss

“The darker the night, the brighter the stars. The deeper the grief, the closer is God.”

-Fyodor Dostoyevsky¹

Ten years ago, I lost a treasure. It wasn't a monetary treasure, although I wish it could have been. It wasn't the loss of a professional goal or personal ambition, which—although disappointing—would have been much easier to accept. But in 2009, I lost one of the most valuable treasures I've ever had—my wife Ulrike died of cancer. Proverbs 31 describes the value of a faithful woman: “Who can find a virtuous wife, for her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts her; so he will have no lack of gain...” (Proverbs 31:10, NKJV). This passage describes Ulrike so well. Losing her was by far the most difficult thing I've ever experienced.

Grief and loss are devastating—both emotionally and spiritually.

We'd like to believe that our lives are relatively stable; assuming that the blessings we experience (including the people) will remain constant. But all too often we are jolted back to the painful reality of living in a broken world. Our faith in God's love for us can be easily shaken through suffering—especially the loss of a loved one.

So how do we live virtuous lives amidst suffering and loss? How do we cope with intense pain and unanswered questions about why God allowed a loss to occur? How do we deal with well-meaning people who try to encourage us with trite or insensitive platitudes such as: “God has a reason for everything,” “God knows best,” or “At least you didn't lose your entire family...”?

Although suffering and loss are extremely difficult, I have found personally that God comes very close during these times. He gently walks with us through “the valley of the shadow of death,”

¹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 337.

(Psalm 23:4), supporting and sustaining us with His promises and provisions. Seasons of grief provide unique opportunities for us to practice virtuous living, trusting God's promise that He will never leave us or forsake us (cf. Hebrews 13:5).

It seems that the most beautiful and the most painful experiences in life cannot be adequately described with words. How do you explain to a person who has never fallen in love what it feels like to be deeply in love? How do you describe the loss of a loved one to someone who never knew the person? Every loss in life is unique, because every person and relationship is irreplaceable. To lose a parent is different from losing a spouse. To lose a child is different from losing a friend. Yet grief cannot be quantified or measured, and it's certainly no respecter of persons.

It's also true that different people experience the pain of loss differently. Even members of the same family often have very different needs when journeying through grief. Given the complex nature of loss, it's impossible for me to provide a comprehensive list of answers to the many difficult questions that arise. But I *can* share a small part of my own story in hopes that it will encourage others who are experiencing the pain of suffering or loss.

I was blessed with a very happy childhood, raised by parents who believed in God and practiced their faith actively and authentically. They trained me well, but once I was old enough to think for myself, I still had to face some existential questions (including questions about God and faith) that defied easy answers. Thankfully, God continued to reveal Himself to me, and I chose to keep trusting Him.

For many years, I was not personally confronted with severe suffering or death. Perhaps as "enlightened" citizens of the western world, living in the 21st century with its amazing progress in science and medicine, we have tried to forget the fact that life is fragile—that suffering, pain, sickness and death still exist. It's easy to talk and think of death in an abstract and theoretical manner until you are confronted with it personally.

Ulrike was only 43 years old when she was diagnosed with the most aggressive form of breast cancer. She didn't have a choice in the matter; none of us did. Ulrike still had a bright future ahead of her and was still very much needed. After staying at home with our three sons for several years, she had recently started working again as an elementary school teacher — a profession she loved. She had a gift for teaching, and was well-loved and respected by both the children and her peers. She was also loved and adored in our family.

Soon after the news of her sickness spread through our community, we were bombarded by well-meaning people who claimed to know of special cures and treatments that could defy the prognosis and restore Ulrike's health. We tried everything that seemed safe and logical to try, but still the disease progressed. My wife was exemplary in her healthy lifestyle, and positive and hopeful in her walk with God.

We supported her as best as we could. We prayed like we had never prayed before. Many people were praying for her. Ulrike received a special anointment for the sick two times — once at the beginning of her illness and again toward the end. But nothing helped! She died less than a year after her diagnosis.

Those who knew Ulrike can testify that she left an amazing example of faithful living and unwavering trust in God. When she died, she was at peace with herself and with God. For her, death was a release from suffering. For our family, it was (and still is) a very harsh loss. She had accepted her death, but we still had to accept life without her.

The loss of my wife robbed my children and I of experiences that can never be recovered. We missed her loving presence at my oldest son's recent wedding. She will never have the joy of one day holding a grandchild in her arms. We can no longer share with her what we are experiencing. We miss her counsel and support. The loss is extremely painful, and cannot be compensated with anything. Sometimes people say that time heals all wounds. That's not true. Time itself can be the wound. Even though the initial pain of Ulrike's loss has grown less intense with passing time,

some of our memories of her have also faded away, causing a different type of loss. Her absence remains a sore spot in our lives.

Suffering is perhaps one of the most acute temptations of faith. The pain of suffering raises tenacious and troubling questions about God that are difficult to answer. The doubt that suffering initiates even has the potential to destroy our faith.² All of the sudden, traditional explanations and answers to suffering no longer make sense. Instead, we are confronted with haunting “why” questions.

I am familiar with these questions. Loss feels so senseless that it’s only natural to ask why: “Why us?” “Why her?” “Why now?” In order to cope with this, we decided to raise our own set of “why” questions: “Why should sickness, suffering and death affect others, but not us?” we asked. After all, we live in a sinful and imperfect world. Christians are promised eternal life, but are not exempt from sickness and death on this side of eternity.

If we follow God only in order to be spared from suffering and death, we follow Him for the wrong reasons! As virtuous children of God, we can live our lives (even when facing adversity) in such a way that others will not doubt God’s goodness to us, but instead see it revealed through our faith. The Bible gives us instruction for how to grieve in a way that keeps our faith intact. Paul wrote that we “do not sorrow like those who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13, NKJV). Our hope in God’s promises can have a contagious effect on the people who observe us during suffering and loss.

Life raises certain questions that cannot be explained theoretically, but are only answered *experientially* as we live in faith, allowing God’s grace and goodness to become visible in our lives. God certainly finds no pleasure in sickness and death. Only the devil enjoys watching us

² Paul David Tripp has written an insightful book about the experience of suffering, when life does not make sense anymore. If you want to learn more about various challenges that are posed by our experience of suffering and how to deal with them from a spiritual perspective I recommend the following books by Paul David Tripp, *Suffering: Gospel Hope When Life Doesn’t Make Sense* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018) and his remarkable and encouraging book *A Shelter in the Time of Storm* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009).

suffer. In an attempt to shipwreck our faith, he tempts us to doubt God’s goodness. Although we suffered tremendously, my family and I firmly decided not to grant the enemy this pleasure.

To suffer is difficult enough. But to suffer without meaning feels unbearable. And yet, life often presents us with painful situations for which we do not have adequate explanations. In these times, I have desperately wanted to find or construct reasons for what I am experiencing so that my suffering will not be meaningless. But I’ve learned to live with some unanswered questions — trusting that even though I don’t understand, there is ONE who knows all things and is constantly working for my good.

Although I don’t fully understand why God allowed my wife to die rather than intervening for her healing, I want my life to show that I still trust His goodness. He sees the big picture and is constantly working for the well-being of His children. Regardless of what we experience, we can “trust everything to the hand that was nailed to the cross for us.”³

When going through adversity, it’s easy to hope that our circumstances will change. We desperately hope that our losses will be prevented, our conflicts will disappear, and our inconveniences will simply go away. We also start comparing ourselves with others — envying those who seemingly have less to suffer or more to enjoy than we do.⁴

But by focusing on the difficulties and obstacles, or ruminating on the unfairness of life, we can easily lose our focus on God, who alone is the foundation and surety of our hope. In my experience, situations like this confront me with a crucial decision. Will I question God’s goodness and power because of my pain, or will I accept each life experience as a unique opportunity to draw closer to Him and to become the person He wants me to be. Will I believe the promise of Scripture that “all things work together for good to those who love God” (Romans 8:28, NKJV), trusting that He can bring blessing out of even the most painful circumstances.

³ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1892), 103.

⁴ See my thoughts on envy, the enemy of virtue in chapter 5 of this book.

I still distinctly remember the moment when I realized what this meant for me. I had to ask myself a very difficult question: Was I really willing to accept that the loss of my wife was now part of my life? This was not planned. This was not my fault. This was not fair. This was not how I had envisioned my future. And yet, it was part of my life. The tremendous loss had become part of my biography, distinguishing me from the person I was before. Whether I wanted to admit it or not, it was part of my new identity.

But to accept this was not easy for me. I was tempted to remain in an illusory state of mind, a make-believe world in which I would not allow the reality of her loss to be part of my life. It seemed far easier to repress the pain than to acknowledge and accept it. But God gave me courage to confront the mechanisms of my denial, and to honestly face the painful reality of Ulrike's absence and all it meant. Only as I did this was I able to start cautiously ordering my everyday life without her.

When I gave up my inner resistance to accepting life without Ulrike, I cried many tears of grief and pain. At the same time, I felt as if a heavy load was lifted off my shoulders. It was as if God lifted me up and gave me wings to help me soar like the eagles again. My decision to accept the loss did not answer every question I had. Loss is a learning process that sometimes lasts for a lifetime.

In my book *Longing for God*,⁵ I have share practical things that helped me cope with my loss, keeping me spiritually sane and even joyful. I especially recommend the simple exercise to develop an attitude of gratitude, and the suggestions on how to meaningfully pray for others. These practices have opened up new horizons in my personal walk with God.

Of course, as a single parent and man, I have special needs and longings that cannot be easily stilled. The enemy always presents temptations for us to numb our pain and loneliness with things that bring quick pleasure but no lasting satisfaction or joy. I have learned – and am still learning – what it means to trust God day by day, and to live by faith.

⁵ Frank M. Hasel, *Longing for God: A Prayer and Bible Journal* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2017).

To live by faith is easily said, but I won't be able to succeed if I try to fabricate solutions to my own problems on my own terms. Instead, I must learn in every area of life to trust God and His amazing grace, even if I don't see how He will ever be able to meet my needs. Then again, I must remember that God has "a thousand ways to provide for us of which we know nothing"⁶ (cf. Jeremiah 33:3). This beautiful truth is something that I cannot adequately express in words, but that I have repeatedly experienced in my own life. To trust God's grace and goodness, remaining connected with Him in difficult times, is worth all the effort it requires. We have a compassionate Father who wants us to bring our longings to Him.

Longing, to me, is a remarkably delightful word. It seems that human beings are never more human than when they are longing for someone or something, with a sparkle and fire in their eyes. To be human is to be full of expectation.

The Christian who longs is not ultimately satisfied with things as they are, but still chooses to remain content and grateful, trusting in God's goodness despite pain and suffering. I long to see the day when Jesus will come again, when God's great love will ultimately prove stronger than even death, resurrecting those who have trusted Him! Then God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and "there will be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There will be no more pain" (Revelation 21:4 NKJV).

Reflection Questions

1. How can changing the "Why me?" question to "Why not me?" alter our attitude toward suffering?
2. How can challenges become unique opportunities to draw closer to God?
3. How does focusing on God's goodness help us in times of suffering?
4. God promises to one day wipe away all tears. What does this promise mean to you personally?

⁶ Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing*, (Pacific Press, 2004), p. 281 More info here: <https://m.egwwritings.org/en/book/2715/info> (accessed: 11-11-2019)