

The Importance of Worship in times of Suffering

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**Rob Douglass
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Christopher J. Kinner

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I. Introduction: Bringing the concepts of worship and suffering together.

As this writer participated in a week long class regarding the importance of worship in the church and various principles of worship design, there was a specific area of ministry the Holy Spirit kept bringing to mind; the importance of worship during times of suffering. Last quarter (spring 2005) Dr. McMickle taught on the importance of pastoral care. Through this class one of the concepts he developed was the "ministry of presence" in which the presence of the pastor represents more to an individual in need. The pastor represents a congregational connection and a connection to the presence of Christ.

The concept of worship as an experience that draws us near to God (Grudem, 1006) is encouraged in scripture. Hebrews 10:22 exhorts us to:

“Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.”

Likewise, God draws near to those who seek Him in worship as asserted in James 4:7-8a:

“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.”

This is further affirmation for the Pastor to observe the ministry of presence to those who may be suffering without forgetting the importance of worship in the context of this setting. Dr. Robert Webber refers to the heart of worship as being “God’s continual movement towards the people of the world and the continual response of the people of God in faith and obedience” (Webber, 19). Dr. Webber also asserts “worship is inextricably interwoven with the theme of salvation” (Webber, 19). This suggests those seeking rescue should be encouraged to engage in worship.

Through this paper this writer will make a case for the importance of worship in the presence of suffering. Generally these two events are not linked together in the mind of most individuals; this writer is convinced that suffering drives the believer to find his/her deepest

satisfaction in the presence of God through the experience of worship. Three examples of worship in times of suffering will be viewed. A Biblical mandate to worship in the presence of hardship will then be explored. Next this writer will focus on the importance of worship as a means of pastoral care and provide some practical suggestions for encouraging worship in times of suffering. This paper will conclude with a brief personal reflection on the importance of worship in times of suffering.

II. Examples of worship in times of suffering

In the book titled, Battling Prostrate Cancer: Getting from “why me” to “what next” Dr. McMickle suggests that those who are diagnosed with cancer may start with the question “why me?” and with other words of self pity, but this is not where they should remain for long. If they are Christians and believe in the words of Romans 8:28,

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

they should be encouraged to look past the initial cry of self pity, fear and shock and look forward to what a gracious God can accomplish through this situation (McMickle, 13).

There are three groups of individuals that come to mind as examples of those who have chosen to worship in times of severe hardship and suffering. These individuals made the transition to seeking what good things God held for their future. The first are missionaries beginning with Paul and Silas, who after being flogged and thrown into jail unjustly, are seen worshipping and praising God.

“After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:23-25).

To many this would seem to be an odd response to the pain of flogging and being placed in stocks; however these missionaries did not become angry with God or the people who they had come to share the gospel with.

Another example of a missionary who found the ability to worship in times of suffering was Adoniram Judson who served as a Baptist missionary to Burma. In a letter written to his first wife's mother after the death of both his wife and two year old daughter only months apart in 1827, he wrote:

“What remains for me, but to hold myself in readiness to follow the dear departed to that blessed world, where my best friends, my kindred dwell, where God, my Savior reigns” (Thompson, 167).

Later in 1845, Judson still on the mission field lost his second wife Sarah and wrote these words:

“I could not help abandoning myself to heartbreaking sorrow. But the promises of the Gospel came to my aid, and faith stretched her view to the bright world of eternal life, and anticipated a happy meeting with those beloved beings, whose bodies are moldering at Amherst and St. Helena” (Thompson, 362).

Adoniram Judson was a man in grief, but was able to draw strength from knowing God had a plan for his future and that God had called Adoniram to serve Him in Burma during that time. Even in the face of suffering and hardship these missionaries continued the work of the Gospel and drew near to God for comfort and hope. The act of worship as seen here is a source of strength for the missionary who may face great suffering in the line of their duties.

A second group that comes to mind is the Christian slaves of the southern United States. While singing groups such as the Jubilees introduced scores of spirituals like “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” and “Steal away” to post slavery America (Ward, 377), one should not forget

the dark and painful crucible in which these “slave songs” were forged. One such song reminds this writer of the pain that Adoniram Judson spoke of and the hope that he clung to.

‘Poor Rosy’

Poor Rosy poor gal; Poor Rosy, Poor gal;
Rosy break my poor heart, Heav’n shall be my home.
I cannot stay in hell one day, Heav’n shall be my home;
I’ll sing and pray my soul away, Heav’n shall be my home.

Got hard trail in my way, Heav’n shall be my home.
O when I talk, I talk, wid God, Heav’n shall be my home.
I dunno what de people want of me, Heav’n shall be my home.
(Allen,7)

The contrast of deep pain and bright hope make this worship both rich and beautiful. The Christian can be encouraged through the example of fellow believers who have suffered unfairly but yet found a way to worship God in spite of the harsh nature of their surroundings.

Finally, we can turn to Jesus as He prayed on the cross. No greater moment of suffering will ever be repeated in all of history and yet in His final moments Jesus extended the gospel message to others in need and prayed earnestly to His father. In spite of His pain and suffering, the crucifixion is a worship service in which the Gospel is proclaimed, prayers are offered and the altar is tended to. In spite of His suffering Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34) and "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). This certainly should set an example for the Christian who gets so involved in the trials and suffering of life and forgets the responsibility God gives us to continually care for the needs of those around us; specifically the need to always be in worship to our King.

III. A mandate to worship in the midst of suffering

Upon inspecting the examples of Christians that have gone before us, one could draw the conclusion that worship was more easily entered into by these ‘saints’ and that lesser Christians

may need to wait until our attitude improves and come back to engage in the act of worship.

Jesus teaches the disciples in John 16:33, “In this world you will have trouble.” Previously they had witnessed Jesus crying at the grave of His friend Lazarus (John 11:35). So how do any of us expect to be spared from tears, grief or sorrow (McMickle, 14)? 1 Peter 4:12-16 states:

“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.”

The encouragement to praise God because you bear the name of Christ here is directly linked to any Christian facing life’s pains, trials and suffering. There is no allowance here for guilt over why things have happened or a qualifier of joy, readiness or confidence in the believer, but simply a mandate that every believer should worship in the very pit of life’s pain. 1 Peter 2:19-21 urges the community of believers to remember that:

“It is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.”

With these scriptures in mind worship can be viewed as a mandate for every believer, even in times of suffering and pain. Hebrews 13:15 tells us that “through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that confess His name.” As Dr. Terry Wardle comments in his book, Draw Close to the Fire: Finding God in the Darkness:

“We can see that all through the Bible, by example and command, praise is to characterize our love and devotion to God. It is a right and proper response to the wonder and majesty of God’s nature and redeeming acts” (Wardle, 192).

Dr. Wardle lists several reasons why praising God in the midst of life's sufferings is important. These are: Because God is worthy, Because of His mighty acts, Because it unleashes His presence and Because it pushes back the evil one.

There is clearly a Biblical mandate to remember God in times of suffering and amidst our pain. However in his book, Where is God: A Personal Story of Finding God in Grief and Suffering, John Feinberg makes an excellent point when he states that being unhappy when we face trials does not mean that we are spiritually immature. "We do have to learn to live with certain things, but that does not mean that we have to like them" (Feinberg, 45)! A great Biblical example of this can be found in Mark 14:33-36 where Jesus is nearing the betrayal:

"He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch." Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "Everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

We know that Jesus did not sin yet he was troubled and saddened; His heart ached regarding the misery that was to come and He felt no joy at following God's will in this situation. Yet we know that He followed the will of His Father and laid down His life for us as an act of obedience and love that caused Him great personal pain and suffering.

The mandate of worship to those suffering can be one of the most precarious tasks a Pastor is involved in. With the life example of suffering yet worshipping, believers laid before us a mandate to worship even during suffering. From scripture in front of us we now turn to bring the truth of Habakkuk 3:17 to the people under our Pastoral care:

"Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior."

IV Encouraging worship in times of suffering

In his book, The Work of the Pastor, Victor Lehman describes the role of a Pastor as one of a “Good Shepherd” (John 10:11) or one who lays down his life for the sheep (Lehman, 32). In the present environment of busy and sometimes disconnected lives, the Pastor and the Church need to follow the guidance of Paul’s teaching in Galatians 6:2, “Share each other’s troubles and problems, and in this way obey the law of Christ.” This kind of care calls for a Pastor who can stand in worship among people in grief.

This should drive a pastor to take seriously two things. First, the ability to be conscious of expanding the discipline of worship within his own life and ministry and secondly to pray and prepare worship opportunities for those who are suffering. This personal action and situational awareness form the first steps to providing an environment where worship can take place.

Prior to discussing specific ways to encourage worship, it is appropriate also to quickly discuss five ways that may discourage worship in the context of pastoral care. The first is talking versus listening. Many times the pastor wishes to say something to make the pain go away. Providing good Christian counsel means offering the sacrifice of listening to those in need. “Anyone with a friend who can sit with them and listen without judging, blaming, giving advice, interpreting, approving, or disapproving, who just listens and understands, is very fortunate” (Miller, 53).

A second barrier can come when the Pastor simply assigns a scripture verse to the face of a problem. Romans 8:28, while a noteworthy and useful scripture, may not be received well by the person who is being cared for. Scripture is a sharp tool and must be used to heal rather than to wound. It should not be carelessly slung around as a magic wand, but rather gently used to

guide and support those in need. Likewise empty slogans such as “we are all going to die,” are better suited for far more empty moments of life as they do not meet the heartache where it is.

Some Pastors try to identify too much with everyone who suffers and this can become a detriment as well. Often people do not want to hear about what makes us alike because they are in the midst of their own grief. Misery does not want company; what is needed is someone to share our burdens not our feelings. There is a difference between “I know how you feel” and “I really feel for you.” The former identifies with the sufferer and the latter shows that we care (Feinberg, 42).

Finally, encouraging people to change their view of the situation so that everything appears fine can also discourage worship for those who are suffering. As stated earlier, the expectation for ‘joy’ or ‘happiness’ in times of suffering to bring people to worship will not work. Even if we can explain pain away for people, often the heart still hurts. With these methods removed the Pastor’s task still remains the same; to guide the suffering into the presence of God so they can worship Him.

There are three ways in which this writer believes a pastor can bring worship to those that are suffering. First and foremost is the “Tool of Faith” (McMikle, 56). This tool allows those suffering to see their present life as a steep uphill journey with pitfalls on every side. However, there is the encouragement for us to just ‘hold on.’ Philippians 4:12-14 states:

“I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.”

This passage can be an encouragement to Pastors as they “share in the troubles” of others and offer the ‘tool of faith’ that says, God will give you the strength to continue. Let us ask Him for

that strength for you. Faith can help them to navigate the valley that they are in and give them the courage to continue on their journey as they suffer. It is possible for those who are suffering to offer their faith as an act of worship to God, if they remember it and cling to their faith in the father to see them through.

A second resource for the Pastor is to have regard for the changeable circumstances of life. Circumstances of life can change so drastically and sometimes those who are suffering need something to hold onto. Dr. Webber spends some time examining the services of the Christian Year (Webber, 217) and examines the weekly and daily cycle of time. When a person is in absolute grief or pain minutes can seem like hours and time can begin to slow. This may be a setting to introduce the marking of time with prayer. Let the suffering know that you will be praying for them three times a day following the pattern of Daniel (Daniel 6:10) and perhaps invite them to join you during these times to say a prayer. This would be another opportunity to serve them in worship and encourage the suffering to worship with you.

Thirdly, the Pastor can encourage worship through encouraging Christians to remember the ‘Roots of their Faith.’ Dr. McMickle shares the story of an old oak tree that inspired him as he faced prostate cancer. The tree had faced howling winds and had its leaves ripped away, but it still stood because its roots were deep and well established (McMickle, 62). Listening to someone’s faith story is imperative to the Pastor and can become another tool for encouraging worship in times of suffering. The hurting person may desire to hear a reading from the liturgy or an old hymn that he/she so loved many years ago or a favorite passage read for them. Perhaps the individual would find comfort in receiving communion to help support them in this time of trial. These are all means of worship that will reconnect them with their roots of faith and help to sustain them through providing a means of worship during a time of suffering. Helping those

that hurt respond to God brings hope to those that are suffering at a deep level where their hearts can be comforted by the presence of the creator Himself. “God ministers to us in worship and calls us to minister to each other” (Webber, 255).

V. Conclusion: Personal Reflections on Worshipping during times of suffering

Personally I have learned that even through the most difficult times of my life that I could still speak to God. I have shared my sorrow with Him and God has “turned my wailing into dancing.” The worst mistakes I have ever made were when in sorrow I ceased to communicate with Him. Now on my journey when my heart aches and the valley seems so dark and terrible, I know I can hold on until this fickle life changes because my roots are planted deeply in Jesus and the spiritual disciplines that He has taught through the work of His church. These acts of worship are things that I have learned to cling to like this old hymn that I wrote in my journal in college when I was going through a very hard time.

<p>Does Jesus Care</p> <p>Does Jesus care when my heart is pained Too deeply for mirth or song, As the burdens press, and the cares distress And the way grows weary and long?</p> <p>Oh yes, He cares, I know He cares, His heart is touched with my grief; When the days are weary, the long nights dreary, I know my Savior cares.</p>	<p>Does Jesus care when my way is dark With a nameless dread and fear? As the daylight fades into deep night shades, Does He care enough to be near?</p> <p>Does Jesus care when I’ve tried and failed To resist some temptation strong; When for my deep grief there is no relief, Though my tears flow all the night long?</p> <p>Does Jesus care when I’ve said “goodbye” To the dearest on earth to me, And my sad heart aches till it nearly breaks, Is it aught to Him? Does He see?</p>
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