

THE LINK BETWEEN SUFFERING AND MISSIONS

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Introduction

Suffering, in its most basic form, implies the undergoing, or experiencing, of negative forces, such as, pain, persecution, etc., as the direct or indirect consequences of one's actions. According to scripture (Gen 3:15-19), suffering, in the form of conflict, pain, corruption, drudgery, and death entered the world immediately after sin entered into creation.

Mission is a broad subject, but a foundational definition is the bringing of people into a right relationship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Both suffering and mission share nothing in common whatsoever, yet, when viewed from a biblical or missiological perspective, there appears to be a strong link between them. This paper shall attempt to highlight some of the different links that make up the chain that holds suffering and mission together.

1. Centripetal Mission and Suffering

The nation of Israel had the God-given responsibility of being set apart to reflect God's glory to the rest of the nations. Israel was to fulfil this mandate, through obedience to God's laws, and holy living, which would, in turn, result in God's glory shining forth from Israel. The nations would be attracted toward Israel, and, ultimately, to God.

Unfortunately, Israel continually failed to fulfil her God-given mandate, because of her ongoing compromise with idolatry,

syncretism, and nominalism: practices that God detested (Lev 26:1; Ps 31:6). This eventually brought God's judgment upon them, and Israel was sent into the exile. It was through the suffering of the exile that Israel was forced, against her own will, to fulfil her mandate (2 Kings 24 and 25). It is within the context of the exile that something of the relationship between centripetal mission and suffering is highlighted. Although the exile appears centrifugal in nature, in that Israel went out, they did not go out with a sense of mission. Israel's mission remained centripetal, only, this time, she was able to reflect God's glory from within the remnant of the nation to those around her. For the first time, Israel began to faithfully acknowledge the sovereignty of God, and, consequently, became strictly monotheistic.

The fulfilment of Israel's centripetal mission mandate came through the experience of suffering. The servant passages in Is 40-55 also signify the relationship of suffering and centripetal mission, in that the prophecy predicted that the suffering of the servant would draw many to him (Is 52:13-15; 53). One contemporary example, which highlights this relationship clearly, is the account of a pastor in a communist nation, who was imprisoned for his faith. Although he suffered greatly from the mental and physical persecution of prison life, he never once went about without a smile, and an attitude of joy. Furthermore, he sacrificed half, or all, of the single piece of bread the prisoners received each week, giving it to fellow prisoners that were weak or sick. Through his actions, his ever-present smile, and attitude of joy, love, and peace amidst the suffering of persecution and depression, many were drawn to him, and ultimately to God.

2. Centrifugal Mission and Suffering

In centrifugal mission, suffering has played a crucial and significant role, in relation to the spread of Christianity. From the OT, right through to the NT, there are accounts of centrifugal mission, which came about, as the result of suffering. It is in these accounts that the relationship, or link, between suffering and centrifugal mission is plainly highlighted, showing both dynamics working closely together, as if in partnership.

From the fall of Adam (Gen 3), to the flood (Gen 6), up to the call of Abraham (Gen 12:1-3), right up to the death of Christ, this relationship can be seen in God's centrifugal mission to a suffering world (John 3:16). The Exodus also falls into this category, in the sense that Moses was sent (Ex 3:7-10) to preach "Yahweh" to the Israelites and Egyptians, thus, bringing about the deliverance of God's suffering people. From this perspective, we can say that suffering plays a significant role in motivating God's centrifugal mission to the world. The account of Jonah is another event that clearly highlights the close link between suffering and centrifugal mission (Jonah 1-4) – beginning with the storm, to his experience in the belly of the whale, and highlighted clearly in his prayer (Jonah 2:1-9). It was suffering that prompted Jonah to respond positively to his God-given mission to the Ninevites.

In the NT, this relationship is brought into clearer perspective, particularly in Acts 8-12, which records the scattering of believers. The scattering occurred as a result of great persecution against the church, and as believers fled from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria, they took with them the message of Christ. Thus, suffering was once again a precipitator of centrifugal mission. It was during this particular time of suffering that Paul, a central figure in God's plan of centrifugal mission, came onto the scene, a case in which the persecutor (Act 8:3) became the sufferer (2 Cor 12) and missionary (Phil 1 and 3). Thus, we see again the link between suffering and centrifugal mission, and, although suffering was not the sole reason for centrifugal mission, suffering did play, and does play, a significant, if not essential, role in it.

3. Suffering and Church Growth

For many people of the world, both Christians and non-Christians, the church is seen as a place of abundant peace, joy, and love; in other words, it is viewed as a place of perfect tranquillity. Spiritually speaking, the church, which signifies the presence of God among His people, is truly a place of perfect tranquillity, but not in the worldly sense. For, in the church, peace that transcends all understanding,

overflowing joy, and true love, are found amid conflict, pain, corruption, and persecution.

Though very unorthodox in relation to human reasoning, suffering, in its various forms, is the fertile soil, from which the church grows, and thus, from which missions are conceived. Time and time again, history has shown that the times of severe suffering, the very times you least expect anything good to happen, have been the very times that the church has experienced tremendous growth. There are basically two ways that the church grows during suffering: outward, as in relation to centrifugal missions, such as the examples of Acts, and inward growth. Inward growth involves more personal spiritual growth, where the lives of the believers are transformed from mediocre Christianity, into dynamic faith that then acts centripetally. Missions, through suffering, is like sowing seeds in tears (Ps 126:5-6). One reason for the remarkable growth of the church in Korea in the 1960s, through the 1980s, was the fact that the church's founders sowed their faith in suffering.

China is another nation that has, and is, experiencing tremendous underground growth, in the midst of persecution from the communist government. These are only two examples of the many nations that are experiencing tremendous church growth during times of suffering, which comes in the form of persecution from governments, religious opposition, or other factors.

Once again, we see the link between suffering and mission being highlighted. Suffering continues to play a significant role in mission, in the form of church growth. According to human reasoning, this should not be so. Why is it that times of severe suffering are times of tremendous church growth? The basic reason is that when materialistic, and familiar, social forms of security are swept away, people become conscious of their deepest needs. It is during these times, when one's foundations are shaken, that one begins to look for a stronger foundation upon which to stand. Often there comes the recognition that God is the needed foundation. Thus, suffering opens the door to mission, because it is during such times that individuals become open to spiritual things, as they seek answers and solutions to

their situations. They become conscious of their mortality, and seek refuge in the immortal. As a result, there is tremendous church growth, because they are receptive and open to mission, and ultimately to God.

4. The Role of Power Encounters in the Link between Suffering and Mission

Power encounters between the forces of God and evil have proven repeatedly to be another significant link in the chain that links suffering and mission. Although, in mission, power encounters can, and do, occur at other times, apart from times of suffering, its significant role in the link between suffering and mission cannot be denied. Power encounters come about, because of the clashes between the forces of good and evil, in both the physical and spiritual realm. In the physical realm, the forces of evil are often represented by institutional evils, such as corrupt and anti-Christian governments, religious opposition, etc., but it can be in other forms. In the spiritual realm, the forces of Satan are the opposition (Eph 6:10-12) that cause suffering, in the form of afflictions, depression, bondage, etc., and they are also the driving forces behind the physical evil.

The Bible clearly highlights the role of power encounters, in relation to the link between suffering and mission, in both the OT and the NT. The role of power encounters is seen in the Exodus of Israel from bondage under Egypt. The titanic struggle between good and evil was witnessed by both Israelites and Egyptians. The resulting power encounter, in the form of ten plagues (Ex 7:11), came about as the result of the cries of a suffering nation to their God (Ex 2:24), hence, the mission of Moses to the people of Egypt and Israel. Likewise, the confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:16-40) also served the purpose of mission, by turning the people back to God during a time of suffering. Suffering from a severe famine sent by God (1 Kings 17:1), and the ensuing power encounter on Mt Carmel (1 Kings 18:16-46), served the purpose of turning the people of Israel back to God.

In the NT, the role of power encounters is highlighted very clearly in the account of Pentecost. Hiding behind the cover of closed doors,

due to the fear of persecution from the Jews (John 20:19), the believers were experiencing a time of suffering. It was during this time of suffering that a power encounter with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2) changed these timid believers into bold and dedicated missionaries (Acts 2:14-47), who persevered, even in the midst of persecution.

Such examples, which highlight the role of power encounters in the link between suffering and mission are not relegated to the biblical context alone. In the present day, power encounters continue to play a prominent role for mission, during times of suffering, thus, bringing into clearer perspective, the link between suffering and mission. At the time of a power encounter, God's sovereignty is established, and His supremacy proved, amid suffering. Power encounters open a door for missions during times of suffering, a door that can be, and has been, used to bring people back to allegiance to God.

5. Biblical Perspective of Suffering, and its Relation to Mission

In the points, above, we have viewed some biblical and contemporary examples that highlight the link between suffering and mission. We have seen from these examples that suffering, in some way or another, works in partnership with missions, a pattern that greatly contradicts human reasoning.

The Bible gives a lot of reasons for suffering, but it still does not fully answer the "Why?" question. According to the Bible, suffering can be the result of sin, or disobedience, for the individual, community, and the nation (Hos 8:7; Rom 5:12). It can be God's way of punishing, or correcting, His people (Prov 3:11; Judg 2:20-3:4; Heb 12:7-11). It can be to test or purify (Ps 66:10; Jam 1:3-12; 1 Pet 1:6-7; Rom 5:3-6), and it can be a means of drawing closer to God, in a new relationship of dependence and intimacy. Suffering is also the outcome of human deceitfulness and perversity.

An element of mystery surrounds the concept of suffering, especially in the light of the countless numbers of innocent people that are suffering in the world today. Yet, the fact remains, that suffering does work in conjunction with mission, thus implying that, while God is not the author of suffering, He does use suffering to bring about His

purposes. The account of Job, for example, highlights a situation of unexplained suffering. Despite Job's innocence, God did not even attempt to give an explanation for Job's suffering, instead He brought attention to the fact that His ways are beyond human comprehension (Job 38-41; Is 55:8-9).

From this account, we can see that, although the reasons for suffering may remain unanswered, suffering can have positive results. For Job, suffering brought him a fresh vision of God's greatness and sovereignty, and brought him close to God in faith. Even Paul, who underwent much suffering, did not receive any answers for his suffering (2 Cor 12:9; 2 Cor 6:3-10). Yet suffering became the motivation for faith, and zeal to keep on striving in his God-given mission (Phil 3:7-14). From this example, we see that God uses suffering as a means of refocusing our attention onto Himself, thus causing us to draw nearer to Him, in acknowledgment of His sovereignty. This same principle applies in relation to mission, as suffering brings to light the realisation of one's mortality and limitations, causing one to look upward, toward an unlimited and immortal God.

From the contents of this essay, we see that suffering plays a significant role in mission. God uses negative things, like suffering, to accomplish His will and purpose for the world. Thus, we can see that, although suffering usually accompanies mission, we do not have to be discouraged, when we suffer in various ways. All we need to do is look back in history and see that, beyond the pain, tears, and persecution, there is good. All we need to do is endure, for God works all things for our good (Rom 8:23).

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