

How long, O Lord?

“Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am faint;
O LORD, heal me, for my bones are in agony.
My soul is in anguish.
How long, O LORD, how long?”
- Psalm 6:2-3.

Our son Edward underwent surgery for a heart reconstruction four weeks ago today. He is still in the intensive care unit. Healing has not proceeded as expected. Our last crisis was five days ago. At 2:15 am his heart rhythm jumped to nearly 180 beats per minute and stayed stuck at that level during the whole day. It is exhausting. He remains on a respirator and his lungs collect much mucus and fluid. I sat next to him most of that day, listening to his noisy breathing, his coughing and the extraction of fluid from his lungs - about every half hour. At times he wanted me to hold his hand. Sometime close to eight that evening, Edward begun to cry. I noticed the tears rolling down his cheeks. I drew closer and he whispered “papa, I just can’t anymore. I want to die.” I hugged him, as one best can, as he sat in bed connected to pipes and cables. We wept together. As I wept I prayed over him.



“Thank you Lord that you are here with us. Lord you are our Rock and our strength. We need you right now. Lord, please help and strengthen Edward.” I encouraged Edward not to give up. “Our dear Lord,” I said, “will give you the strength to go on.” “But I don’t feel it!” he whispered in replied. Soon the nurse gave him morphine and some other sleeping substance. He slept. His noisy breathing continued. So did his high heartbeat rate. I left exhausted. As I walked back to the guest house, I prayed again and again, “How long, O Lord, how long?”

Have you experienced that Divine silence in a moment of desperate need? I can imagine that Mary and Martha must have felt something similar as their brother Lazarus lay dying. Jesus did not show up when He was most needed. “Lord,” Mary said, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:32). Why that painful delay?

Waiting for a miracle

After spending weeks in a hospital setting, the Bible stories of miraculous healings become very attractive. We read that, “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing **every** disease and sickness among the people” (Matt. 4:23). No case was too complex for Him. “Many followed him, and he healed **all** their sick” (Matt. 12:15). No ill person who met Jesus returned home sick. “People brought all their sick to him and begged him to let the sick just touch the edge of his cloak, and **all** who touched him were healed” (Matt. 14:35-36). Similarly with the apostles (Acts 5:15-16). Can you imagine the relief and joy of the healed and their families? The blessing was twofold: the healing and the speed of that healing.

A sick woman approached Jesus for healing. She “touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped.” Not only was she healed, she was “instantly healed” (Luke 8:44, 47). This is particularly attractive to those of us who crave for instant solutions. But before you idealize the situation, notice that before many of those miracles occurred there were years of suffering and pain. This woman, for example, was “subject to bleeding for twelve years” (Luke 8:43). Can you imagine how she felt all those years? If single, it would affect her chances of marriage. If



married, it affected her love life. Mark adds “She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse” (Mark 5:26). At times she must have felt desperate. ‘How long, O Lord, how long?’ Do you feel that your loneliness, sickness or crisis is lasting too long? Is it growing worse?

Suffering for a reason

The Bible contains a number of stories about blind people. In some cases we can detect a possible reason for such trial. Paul was blinded by the Lord for “three days” in order to slow him down and prepare him to receive new instructions (Acts 9:8-9). Elymas was punished with blindness “for a time” for “perverting the right ways of the Lord” (Acts 13:9-11). We know that some face sickness and trials because “God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows” (Gal. 6:7), and others simply suffer because they live as Christians (1 Peter 4:16). Have you ever suffered? There is a lot of pain around. Some is visible and may draw empathy for a while. But much suffering is not noticed, or forgotten by others because it has lasted too long.

Jesus met and healed a man who was born blind. It must have been a fantastic experience to see for the first time. It must have also been an emotional moment for his parents. Over the years they must have suffered. First the shock when they discovered that their baby was blind. Then the difficulties connected with raising such a child. The worries about their son’s future.

The disciples, like you and I, wanted to know the reason for such a prolonged trial. They asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" In replying, the Lord said, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned." The direct cause of this long and painful trial was not sin – like in the case of Gehazi (2 Kings 5:24-27). Neither was it the work of Satan or demons, as was the case with Job and the boy who suffered convulsions (Job 2:1-7 & Mark 9:17-27). Jesus explained that "this happened so that the work [Lit. 'works' – plural] of God might be displayed in his life" (John 9:1-21). Were such "works of God" only displayed on the day that he was healed? Surely God was at work every day of that prolonged trial, in the soul of the sufferer, his family, and those who knew him.

Who knits babies together?

Late last Friday I walked back from the hospital to this guest house with a fellow guest. He looked discouraged. "How was your day today?" I asked. "Bad. The worst possible news. I was told today that my 6 month old daughter has been diagnosed with a rare form of leukaemia. They cannot help her. They will transfer her next Monday to a hospital in Rotterdam for experimental treatment." Then, while shaking slowly his head, he muttered, "It's not fair!" There is a time to talk and a time to listen. Those are moments where we only listen. There is some comfort in knowing that someone else feels a little of your pain – or at least is trying to. But where is our loving Father in all this?

A line in one of David's songs reads, "you knit me together in my mother's womb" (Psalm 139:13). Does God only knit together the healthy children? Who knits together the other ones? When Moses complained about his limited communication skills, the LORD said to him, "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind?



Is it not I, the LORD?' (Ex. 4:11). God plays an active role. For some good reason, He also knits together the blind, the deaf, the handicapped, those with leukaemia, with congenital heart disorders...

At first sight, it appears that we are accusing God of doing evil. I can well understand the desire to credit a good and loving God only with the healthy babies. But should we? The Bible doesn't. There are many more Bible texts that show that our good and loving God sometimes actively promotes sickness, suffering, and, from our perspective, disasters. Last week I received an email from some friends in London who are parents to a handicapped child. They drew my attention to Exodus 4:11. They said that this text was an encouragement to them when their child was born, and still is today, more than 20 years later. What in this verse could be an encouragement to them? The fact that their child's disability was not some unfortunate coincidence. Neither was it the work of Satan. Rather, their wise and loving heavenly Father chose to knit that child together in that special way. Satan uses pain and suffering to destroy. Our Loving Father uses them for some higher good.

My life is a small part of something larger

At his prime, Moses, a well educated man, was forced to spend 40 years away from civilization. He spent the years working well below his training and capabilities: looking after someone else's sheep in a desert. I suspect his frustration must have been similar to that of Ingrid Betancourt, the 41 year old presidential candidate who was kidnapped on 23 February 2002 and chained to a tree in the jungles of Colombia for more than 6 years. This long isolation caused frustration, depression and a serious desire to commit suicide. How desperate did Moses become? His potential was being wasted. I can easily imagine a 'How long, O Lord, how long' flowing from his lips. Doesn't God care about the sufferings of a lonely Moses?

After 40 years of waiting in the desert, God calls Moses from the burning bush. The timing of this call was connected with developments elsewhere. Moses was to learn that although he was special in God's sight, he was only a small part of a larger picture. The LORD said, "I have indeed **seen** the misery of my people in Egypt. I have **heard** them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am **concerned** about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians" (Ex. 3:7-8). God's good and loving plans for the life of Moses were connected with His plans for the nation of Israel. And God's plans for Israel were connected with developments in other nations (Gen. 15:16; Deut. 9:5). Interestingly, years before Israel descended into Egypt, God shared with Abraham that they would be "enslaved and ill-treated four hundred years" (Gen. 15:13-14). The trials of Moses fitted into a Divine plan. His sufferings formed part of a larger picture. Perhaps ours do to.



In moments of acute pain and during prolonged trials, our loving heavenly Father 'sees' our pain and misery. He 'hears' our heart's cry. He 'knows,' feels, empathises with our suffering. These weeks have taught me again that it hurts to see a loved one suffer. What did God 'feel' as he saw the suffering and heard the cries of his beloved people being oppressed for 400 years? He hurts with us.

Growing through trusting God's timing

For nearly four weeks we have been living in a guest house next to a UMC hospital here in Holland. We share a kitchen, dining room and living room with 24 other families, each with a child in some critical situation, each with its pain, and each with its story to tell. Some go home after a couple of days, others remain here for weeks, even months. We smile with a deep sense of envy when happy families go home. When will it be our turn? When our son Edward was operated, we were expecting him to remain a week in the intensive care unit, followed by a week of two in the cardiac ward before going home. But four weeks later he is still in the intensive care unit. It feels as if life has stopped. Living under constant uncertainty leads to fatigue. We do little all day, and yet go to bed exhausted. We all want to go home and 'get on with life.' How long, O Lord? Why do You delay?

The fact that our heavenly Father is working out His global plans, does not mean that He is not concerned for the individual. We are told that through all circumstances He works for the good of his children (Rom. 8:28). During those 'wasted' years in the desert and the difficulties of leading God's people, God gradually change Moses from an assertive 'yes I can' man, into a meek man, "more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). In what way will Edward be different because of his complex heart condition? Are you waiting for something to change? Are you also crying, 'How long, O Lord, how long?' Could it be that He is also preparing us for something?

The Lord's choice of timing is always driven by a good reason. Sometimes we catch a glimpse of it, frequently we are kept in the dark. As we wait, we learn to sit when we would like to walk, to walk when we would like to run, to trust when we would like to understand.

Called to live 'today'

The Lord Jesus knows that living to please the Father in a fallen world can be very difficult. Sometimes the suspense, the trials, the pain can feel unbearable. In the Divine formula, the key word is 'today.'

Today's worries: The Lord Jesus taught his disciples how to cope: "do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. **Each day** has enough trouble of its own" (Matt. 6:34). Accept only the challenge of living well today. Trust the Lord for tomorrow. Do you feel that your current



trial is about to break, destroy or consume you? Remember that "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new **every morning**; great is your faithfulness" (Lam. 3:22-23). Don't attempt to carry the weight of an uncertain future. Careful planning may well be necessary, but choose not to carry the weight of those plans. Deliberately place your future, your plans, your worries, in His good hands. "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:7). This is an invitation we need to respond to.

Today's needs: The Lord Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "Give us **today** our daily bread" (Matt 6:11). We prefer to have food stored up at home for a week or more. We value security. The Lord God said to Moses "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out **each day** and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions" (Ex. 16:4). Ask and receive from the Lord the nourishment and the strength that you need for today. Don't worry about God's provision for tomorrow. Only when tomorrow becomes today, will our good and faithful Lord provide for the needs of tomorrow. Yes, He wants us to trust Him.

Today's task: What is the secret to being a useful Christian? Choose to die to our own dreams, ambitions and plans. Isn't this what surrendering our life to Jesus means? "And he died for all,

that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Cor. 5:15). Only upward facing empty hands can receive from the Lord. There is an initial 'dying' that takes place at conversion. We surrender our all to Christ. But we so easily forget who owns our life. If we want God to work in us and through us today, that surrender must be real. Our self denial must be confirmed. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross **daily** and follow me" (Luke 9:23). As we take up our cross, as we consider ourselves dead to all our man-made dreams and goals, our priorities change. We are set free to follow Him today.

Just "a little while"

How long, o Lord? Normally we are not told how long. We learn daily to trust. While on earth, our loving Father has ensured that both happy and painful times are limited. They are temporal. He reminds us that they are to be enjoyed or endured for 'a little while.' He has given us new birth into a living hope, He has given us an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. But "now for **a little while** you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith, of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire, may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:3-7). The 'little while' may be a few hours or a few years (1 Peter 5:10). The 'little while' may involve the rest of our life on earth (Heb. 10:37). But that trial will definitely, in 'a little while,' come to an end. The Lord knows when. Trust Him.

Conclusion

Sometimes it is the Lord's will that we should endure pain. Sometimes such pain is unbearably acute or frustratingly long. If our heavenly Father is silent, it does not mean that He is not concerned. He sees our situation and hears our cry. Because He loves us dearly, He hurts when we hurt. When He chooses to delay, it is because it is the only way to achieve His good, loving and perfect goal. And what should we do while we wait? "Those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good" (1 Peter 4:19).



Postscript: Like the previous article, 'Deep Waters,' I write and circulate these thoughts while our son Edward is still recovering in the Intensive Care unit. They reflect our current challenge to harmonize what we see, what we feel, what we think and what we believe. It is God's Word that can help us interpret reality, correct our thinking and calm those storms that sometimes rage in our emotions. Perhaps something here may also be a blessing or an encouragement to you.

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