

Don't Waste Your Suffering

In my previous article, I posed the question, “What if the local church were taken away?” Gathering with the people of God for worship and fellowship, as well as using our gifts on behalf of one another, is a blessing, not a burden. This section of Psalm 102 (verses 3-11) tells us that the Psalmist is going through a serious time of suffering. And yet, in verses 12-18, the Psalmist begins to look to the future and the fact that God’s promises given to his people cannot fail. “You will arise and have pity on Zion.....For the LORD builds up Zion; *he appears* in his glory; he regards the prayer of the destitute and does not despise their prayer. Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD....” Taken together, verses 3-18 remind us that the promises of God in the Covenant—although they minister to us as individuals—are not individualistic. This should *also* be a reminder to us of the importance of reading the promises of scripture to those who are suffering—assuming they’re physically unable to get out of their home or hospital bed—or to make sure that, if they’re able, they’re gathered with God’s people for worship. We need to be where the Word of God is read and preached and the fellowship and prayers of God’s people are sweet and encouraging—not least, in times of suffering. The Psalmist gives us an example to follow. Whatever we’re going through, we want to use our sickness and suffering as an opportunity to glorify God and encourage others with the promises of God given in his word.

In 2006 well-known pastor John Piper was being treated for prostate cancer. Because Piper is a prolific author, he wanted to write something that would build up the body of Christ during his suffering. He wrote a little booklet entitled, “Don’t Waste Your Cancer.” Listen to some of the points that he makes as he has meditated on his situation and, more importantly, as he meditated on God. As you listen to these, you can replace the word “cancer” with any serious sickness or suffering you’re experiencing. “We waste our cancer if we do not believe it is designed for us by God; We waste our cancer if we refuse to think about death; We waste our cancer if we spend too much time *reading about cancer* and not enough time *reading about God*; We waste our cancer if we refuse to use it as a means of witness to the truth and glory of Christ.” Piper concludes in this way: “This will be an opportunity to bear witness. Christ is infinitely worthy. Here is a golden opportunity to show that he is worth more than life. Don’t waste it.” This is just one example of encouraging others—especially others in the church—no matter what God is doing in our lives. We’ve seen the promises of God recalled. Let’s look now at:

—Praises From God’s People

In verses 19-22 the Psalmist highlights God’s love for his people. He also shares his belief that future generations of God’s people will gather together to give God the praise which he alone

deserves. “.from heaven the LORD looked at the earth, to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die, that they may declare *in Zion* the name of the LORD and *in Jerusalem* his praise, when peoples gather together, and kingdoms, to worship the LORD.” This section is just brimming with Covenant Theology. God’s favor, richly poured out, is tied to God’s promises to his Covenant people *as a whole*.

Because of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. at the time of the Babylonian captivity, sadly, corporate worship in the Temple is not taking place. At this particular time in redemptive history, God’s people have not yet been released from Babylon. And yet, the Psalmist makes a statement about God looking down from heaven! He has not forsaken his Church! He hears the “groans of the prisoners” (vs. 20); he will not let his people be entirely destroyed or forgotten. The Psalmist speaks of a coming day when God’s people will go back to Zion; the Temple will be rebuilt (implied) and God will, once again, be worshiped in Jerusalem! We know that this happened historically, beginning in 538 B.C. when the first group of captives were released to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple (Ezra 1:1-3). This amazing news was reason enough for God’s captive people, at that time, to be encouraged! God’s promises in scripture to 21st century Christians are reason enough for us to be encouraged as well. No matter how bad things may seem; no matter how much suffering we go through; the “gates of Hell” will not prevail against the Church that Jesus Christ died for!

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