

God's Presence In the Midst of Suffering

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We have all experienced the pain of suffering. Suffering comes in many forms. It can come in the form of grief when a loved one dies or when a couple gets a divorce. It can come in the form of shock as in the event of an accident or violent crime. Suffering can also be long standing as in illness, unemployment, or homelessness. Whether the suffering is anticipated or unexpected, long or short duration, it is always unwelcome. Sometimes we try to make sense of our suffering and we ask "why." Assigning blame to others, ourselves or God becomes our mission. Worse yet, sometimes we try to figure out the reason for someone else's suffering. The most famous example is found in the book of Job. Job's friends had all sorts of explanations for the suffering he was enduring. However, their explanations did not comfort Job. Truthfully, God does not often tell us the reason for suffering. He did not tell Job even though Job was "... blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." (Job 1:8b NIV) Suffering is not an "I'll get you" from God.

We can be assured that God is with us, even in our suffering. He does not abandon us, rather He promises "never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5) Admittedly, it can be difficult to see His hand or feel His presence in our lives during suffering. That is where faith begins and active looking for Him continues. The lives of Corrie and Betsie Ten Boom offer a poignant example. The Ten Boom family lived in Haarlem, Holland. During the German invasion of 1941, the Ten Boom family helped many Jews to escape to freedom. In 1944, Corrie was reported to authorities by a man who had pretended to need her help. Corrie, her sister and father were taken to jail. Ten days after his incarceration, her father died.

After several different jails and prisons in Holland, Corrie and her sister, Betsie, were reunited and transferred to the Ravensbruck Concentration camp in Germany. Ravensbruck was known as the women's death camp. Here, the sisters and other inmates experienced horrendous atrocities. Subjected to hard labor with little food or water, Betsie became ill. Whippings and beatings were commonplace in the camp. While living in such horrible conditions, Corrie was quite angry and resentful. It was Betsie that helped her to see the blessings of such a place. Heroically, Corrie and Betsie began to hold small secret prayer meetings in their Barrack at night. Eventually, these meetings became quite large, and the scripture reading was translated into several languages. Wanting to stay away from the large infestation of fleas, the guards stayed away from their Barrack and did not disrupt the prayer meetings. Their Barrack was known as "the crazy Barrack filled with hope." Somehow behind the barbed wire, near the chimneys that threw out the gray smoke of incinerated bodies, underneath the whips of the guards, in the midst of unspeakable suffering and pain, the inmates felt God's presence and found hope.

Shortly before her death in the camp, Betsie told Corrie "We must tell them what we have learned here. We must tell them that there is no pit so deep that He is not deeper

still.” True for Corrie and Betsie, it is also true for us. Not only is God with us in our suffering, there is no suffering so great that He cannot comfort. Ten days after her sister’s death, Corrie was released from the Camp. Her release was said to be due to human error. Certain that God’s plans had more to do with her release, Corrie continued to walk with God and trust God throughout the rest of her life. In the wise words of Corrie Ten Boom, “God has plans – not problems- for our lives.”

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