

Session 11

Role of Men in the Church

Man as Struggler – Job

“Sighing comes to me instead of food; my groans pour out like water. What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil.” Job 3:24-26

“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.” I Peter 4:12, 13

- I. God makes it clear that life will not always be easy but modern man doesn't want to hear this message.
 - A. We live in a world in which most people believe that they have the inalienable right not to suffer.
 1. Until recently, we believed that a war could be fought without casualties (the Persian Gulf War).
 2. We expect a cure for every misery or affliction.
 - a. Over 10% of Americans take antidepressant medications. This is in part due to our belief that it is abnormal to experience depression (though many people can benefit from antidepressants). We are “listening to the call of Prozac.”
 - b. One of the major shifts in modern medicine is a shift toward a zero tolerance for pain. This shift is, on the whole, a good one yet again it reflects our intolerance for suffering.
 3. We buy many appliances to insure that we do not have to struggle or work too hard.
 - a. Lawnmowers which we ride rather than push.
 - b. Electric screwdrivers.
 - c. Automatic dishwashers.
 - d. Remote controls for the TV so we do not have to leave our chairs to change a channel.
 - B. If we accept struggle as a normal part of our lives, others frequently think of us as strange, perhaps masochistic. Consider how strange the following sounds. “To be born is to suffer; to grow old is to suffer; to die is to suffer; to lose what is loved is to suffer; to be tied to what is not loved is to suffer; to endure what is distasteful is to suffer; In short, all the results of individuality, of separate self-hood, necessarily involves pain or suffering.” Subhadra Bhikshu

- C. The apparent absence of struggle and suffering is perhaps uniquely American. In many countries throughout the world, struggle and suffering are considered a normal part of life.
- D. Yet is this aversion to struggle and suffering satisfying? Men (and many women) have reacted against this lack of struggle, this easy life.
 - 1. We are into extreme sports (X games, adventure vacations [such as white water rafting])
 - 2. We put in incredible hours at our jobs at time and take pride in how long and how hard we work (the goal of such hard work is frequently unclear).
 - 3. We plan a trek through the Amazon or an ascent of Mt. Kilimanjaro.

II. The challenge to men in the church of struggling as a Christian

- A. One of the earliest metaphors of the Christian life is that of the Christian as a pilgrim, struggling through life. Pilgrims keep pressing forward because of the hope for reward in the future, but they accept that the current life will be difficult.
 - 1. In describing the men and women listed in the great roll call of faith, the writer of Hebrews notes that, “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.” Hebrews 11:13
 - 2. John Bunyan’s great classic *The Pilgrim’s Progress* emphasizes the struggles of the Christian in contrast to the apparent ease of secular life. The pilgrim, Christian, must withstand the “slough of despond”, “the valley of humiliation”, and the temptation of the “house beautiful” before he reaches the “celestial city.”
 - 3. Nathaniel Hawthorne describes the seduction of the “celestial railway” as an easy way to get to heaven, only never to arrive at the destination.
- B. Yet this metaphor has lost much of its strength (and appeal) in recent years.
 - 1. Oral Roberts encouraged us that “something good is going to happen to you” (referring to being blessed on this earth as Christians). *The Prayer of Jabez* has become a number one best seller for the same reason. (Of course, we must remember that Christians should pray for bounty from the Lord and not become masochistic about our faith as some might have been in the past. Yet the pendulum has swung far the other way in recent years.)
 - 2. We are less inclined to look forward (to the heavenly city) as Christians today. Though John in the Revelation witnessed a future of joy and life abundant, we want to experience the full blessings of God now.
 - a. We place great pressure upon our churches to lift our moods and charge our batteries and to eliminate our struggles during our worship services.
 - b. We expect our churches to fill the vacuum of loneliness we feel.
 - c. We expect our ministers to have ready answers to all our questions of doubt.

3. We often measure the strength of a person's faith by the external evidence of that person's health and prosperity.
 - a. If we continue to suffer pain or to be depressed, something must be wrong with our faith. The church should be filled with healthy and happy people
 - b. Industrious, hard working Christians with a dose of good financial management should not experience difficulties with finances. The church parking lot should be filled with BMWs.
4. Whereas at one time we were, as Christians, very hesitant to take any medication to treat our depressed mood, for the most part we have no hesitancy to take these drugs today. Perhaps as many as 15% of adult Christians take antidepressants. (Do not be mistaken. Christians in the past were unreasonably concerned about these medications. Yet today, though thousands have been helped by antidepressants, our attitude about the drugs has changed dramatically. We almost believe that no one should experience depression and that there is a pill for everything. Christians are often as likely to try to find a shortcut to happiness as others.)

III. The struggles of Job

- A. The story of Job could have been set at almost any time during Old Testament times. The story is as relevant today as it has been for thousands of years. The basics of the story are well known. Job, a good man, is tested because God has confidence that he will not curse him in the face of even the most severe struggles. He loses his possessions, members of his family and his good health. He receives little comfort from his friends. We learn of Job's struggles through his conversation with his friends and his conversation with God.
- B. Though he does not curse God, he is far from being a stoic regarding his struggles.

“May the day of my birth perish...Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came out of the womb?...I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil.” Job 3
- C. Job does not justify his suffering because of specific sins and refuses to hear his friends counsel about specific sin. Struggle is a part of life, of the sacred journey, for Job.

“Does not man have hard service on earth? Are not his days like those of a hired man?” Job 7:1
- D. Job receives an answer regarding his suffering, but not the answer he desires.
 1. Who are you, Job, to question God regarding your suffering? “Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand.” Job 38:4
 2. Can you even begin to think you can understand the ways of the Lord God? “Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place...Have the gates of death been shown to you? Have you seen the gates of the shadows of death? Job 38:12, 17

3. Does anyone have the right to claim justice from the Lord? “Who has a claim against me that I must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to me.” Job 41:11
 4. Who are you, Job, to question or accuse God? “Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!” Job 40:1
 5. I will question you. I will judge you. “I will question you, and you shall answer me. Would you discredit my justice?” Job 40:7, 8
- E. Job responds that he cannot understand the ways of the Lord. This does not quiet his pain. What Job gains is a greater appreciation of the mystery of God.
1. “I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.” Job 42:2
 2. “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand.” Job 42:3
- F. Job’s only recourse is repentance. “Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.” Job 42:6
- G. Paul, as did Job, suffered for reasons he did not understand, even though he had been privileged by a vision of Christ in heaven. “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan, to torment me.” II Corinthians 12:7

IV. Men, struggle and suffering in Christ. The role of the church.

- A. We must create an atmosphere in our churches in which we understand and accept struggle and suffering as a part of the sacred journey.
1. We must take care not to equate the joy one finds in Christ with temporal pleasures, such as physical health and financial security.
 2. We must be open to men in our congregation (probably one to one or in small groups) opening up regarding their suffering as Job opened his complaints to his friends.
 3. Unlike Job’s friends, we must be accepting of suffering without feeling the compulsion of explaining the “why” of suffering.
- B. We must understand God’s “theology of suffering.” For example,
1. How does the reality of suffering meld with the love of God.
 2. How does the unremitting guilt which accompanies a severe depression fit with the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ?
 3. Why do some have to work so much harder than others when we cannot find a good reason based on either their talents nor their efforts?
 4. Why does the world seem to prosper at times when the church seems to struggle and suffer?
- C. We must recognize that through struggle and suffering our faith is purified.
1. “In this [God’s power] you greatly rejoice, though 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 honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” I Peter 1:8

2. “Dear friend, 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.” I Peter 4:12

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