

Why God ‘Maximizes’ Opportunities for Love and Faith, and Doesn’t Minimize Pain

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Introduction: The Crime and the Love that Followed

In South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, forgiveness is public and brings about new relationships. Author Philip Yancey narrates one story. ‘The rules were simple: If a white policeman or army officer voluntarily faced his accusers, confessed his crime, and fully acknowledged his guilt, he could not be tried and punished for that crime. Hard-liners grumbled about the obvious injustice of letting criminals go free, but Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu insisted that the country needed healing even more than it needed that particular brand of justice. At one hearing, a policeman named van de Broek recounted an incident when he and other officers shot an 18-year old boy and burned the body, turning it on a fire like a piece of barbeque meat, to destroy the evidence. Eight years later van de Broek returned to the same house and seized the boy’s father. The wife was forced to watch as policemen bound her husband on a woodpile, poured gasoline over his body, and ignited it. The courtroom grew hushed as the elderly woman who had lost first her son and then her husband was given a chance to respond. ‘What do you want from Mr. van de Broek?’ the judge asked. She said she wanted van de Broek to go to the place where they burned her husband’s body and gather up the dust so she could give him a decent burial. With his head down, the policeman nodded agreement. Then she, a follower of Jesus, added a further request: ‘Mr. van de Broek took all my family away from me, and I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month, I would like for him to come to the ghetto and spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him. And I would like Mr. van de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him too. I would like to embrace him so he can know my forgiveness is real.’ Spontaneously, some in the courtroom began singing Amazing Grace as the elderly woman made her way to the witness stand, but van de Broek did not hear the hymn. He had fainted, overwhelmed.’ (Philip Yancey, *Rumors of Another World*, Zondervan, 2003)

God ‘Maximizes’ Opportunities to Love

When I read that story, I was touched by the faith and love of this Christian woman even in the midst of human evil. But, of course, I was led to ask whether God cared about her suffering.

It seems to us, at least at times, that God does not care about our physical suffering. He certainly does not always answer our prayers that He take physical suffering away. He does not forcibly stop other people from harming us or one another. In the Old Testament, He did protect the people of Israel so they could eventually be the conduit of His personal coming to earth as the man Jesus of Nazareth. But this protection does not seem to extend to anyone beyond Jesus, who brought Israel’s vocation to a climax. (I find that sometimes people think God is actively cruel for defending Israel their enemies. And then we think God is passively cruel for not defending us. Whether this reflects consistency in human thinking or consistency in human resistance to God is a side note which must be explored in other places.)

On the one hand, the truth is that God does care about our physical suffering. He Himself suffers our rejection of Him, and our injuries done to one another. When Saul was persecuting the earliest Christians, Jesus appeared to him and said, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ (Acts 9:4). How exactly Jesus feels the suffering of his people, I don’t know. Perhaps he even feels it more deeply than we do, because he is also deeply grieved by the evils done by people, and the further degenerative impact that has on their already corrupted human nature, whereas we are mostly sensitive to our own pain. But, from the example of Acts 9 and many others in Scripture, I trust that Jesus does not ask us to bear things that he isn’t willing to go through himself, with us. Just because Jesus is the Son of God doesn’t mean he can’t suffer. And besides that, there are many things that God is doing through people’s free choices which counteracts how much evil and pain there is in the world.

On the other hand, God cares more about ‘maximizing’ opportunities for faith and love (I’ll explain why I put that in quotes below). There is a positive that He can help us experience in the midst of the negative. Those moments of our faith and love are precious to him because they are freely expressed by us, not coerced by Him. Peter spoke of the faith of suffering Christians as ‘being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire’ (1 Pet.1:7). For it is this faith which makes us partakers of the divine nature that was united with our human nature in Jesus Christ (2 Pet.1:4) to remake it and heal it, so that we might be healed and transformed on a fundamental level when we are joined to this Jesus. It is this ongoing faith that makes us agents of God, inviting others to participate in Jesus’ healing and transformation of human nature. So, while God does care about our suffering, He doesn’t minimize it. That is not His highest priority, because we can participate in God’s very life even in the midst of

human suffering and evil. And those moments of faith and love are more precious to Him because those decisions can shape our human nature on a fundamental level that has eternal significance.

God can restore physical life and even our physical bodies with a (proverbial) snap of His fingers. So He is more patient than we are with suffering because we don't have the ability to restore physical life and health. We think those are the ultimate commodities of life. God, however, can heal every wound, and will in the resurrection. He can make pain a memory, a very distant memory, where He will wipe away every tear. But He cannot *force* people to love one another. He cannot *force* people to love Him either. He cannot force us to yield our corrupted human nature up to Jesus for him to reshape into his image. So God bears patiently with our suffering and evil because He can offer His transforming life and love even in the midst of it all. This is why I put the word 'maximizing' in quotes. God is not performing a calculation where He maximizes one variable in the equation. Rather, He is constrained by His own character of love to grant us free will in this period where we are choosing who we are becoming.

The Difference Between God's Priorities and Ours

This is where we come to a significant difference between God's priorities and ours. God wants to defeat His deepest enemies, the ultimate oppressors of humankind: the corruption in human nature called sin, along with the brokenness in relationships and the physical death that results from our sin. We, on the other hand, tend to be only mildly opposed to sin, broken relationships, and death. From our limited perspective, if a person lives a decent life mostly caring for his family, and then dies at an old age, we tend to accept that as natural. C.S. Lewis said, 'We want, in fact, not a Father in Heaven, but a grandfather in heaven – a senile benevolence who, as they say, 'liked to see young people enjoying themselves,' and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, 'a good time was had by all.' (C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p.38) God, however, sees even death by natural causes to be a supreme violence to the human being, relational myopia as morally detestable, unreflective participation in unjust systems to be willful ignorance, estrangement from Him as heartbreaking, and the corruption in our human nature as a defilement of His supreme work of art. That is why God is firmly and implacably opposed to sin and death. So God always provides opportunities for people to love Him and one another, apart from, but also in spite of, human suffering.

God certainly did not cause the South African woman's pain and suffering. He was always against it, because He was against the white policeman's brutality, speaking in his conscience against the very acts he was committing, and speaking in history through His people Israel and personally through Jesus himself and through Jesus' followers. And throughout her hardship, God walked with her, comforted her, and gave her compassion for her enemy. He loved her. He also loved the man who murdered her husband and son. And she shared in God's victory over human sin, by sharing in the Father's love, through the Holy Spirit of Jesus, who united human nature and God's divine nature in his own physical body. She allowed the love of God to manifest itself in her, because of her spiritual connection to this very Jesus, and pointed towards the day when Jesus will be ultimately victorious over all human death, suffering, and evil.