

The Way to Freedom

Week 5: Suffering

(Passion)

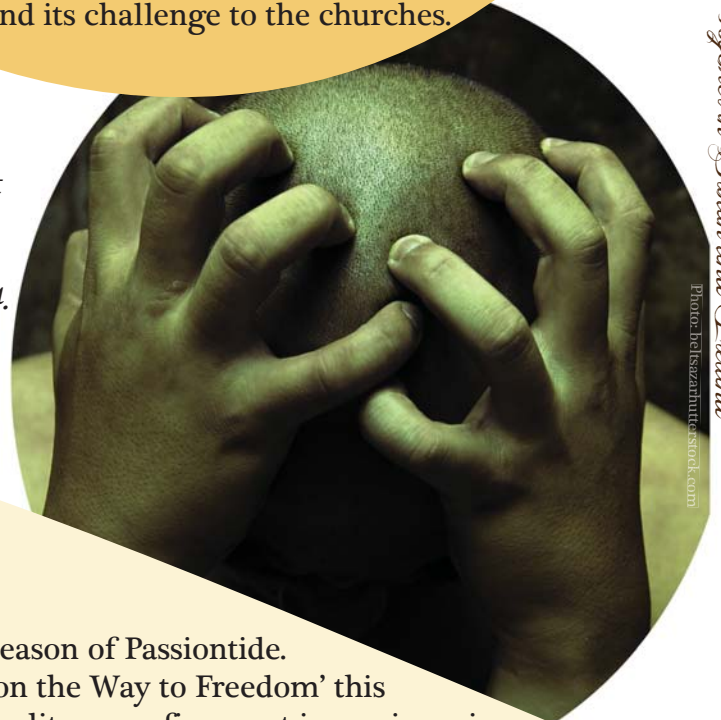
Summary

In this 5th week, we look at the significance of the 3rd verse, 'Suffering', in Bonhoeffer's poem 'Stations on the Way to Freedom'. We shall:

- + Look especially at the kind of suffering which consists of loss of power and strength (Job!).
- + Look at this as seen in John Chapter 21 and Paul's own account of his 'weakness' in 2 Corinthians.
- + Read two testimonies (one of them a poem) about facing suffering through faith and prayer.
- + Ask if and how it is true that there is a strength or freedom to be found in suffering.
- + Look at the fact of ageing in our society today and its challenge to the churches.

Suffering

Wondrous transformation!
Your hands, strong and active,
are bound
Powerless, alone, you see that an end is put
to your action.
You sigh in relief, the right committing righteous
calmly into a stronger hand; and rest contented.
Just for one blissful moment you could feel the sweet
touch of freedom,
then you gave it to God.¹
Dietrich Bonhoeffer, written in prison 1944.



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Suffering ~ What Kind?

This theme is especially appropriate as we enter the season of Passiontide. And of all the verses in Bonhoeffer's poem 'Stations on the Way to Freedom' this one so clearly and literally reflects his context: close, solitary confinement in a grim prison cell after a lifetime of 'action'. But his exact situation when he wrote these verses in August 1944 was even more forbidding than simply imprisonment as such. Bonhoeffer had been imprisoned for over a year on suspicion of various activities opposed to the regime but as yet the authorities had little inkling of the actual conspiracy let alone Bonhoeffer's involvement in it, and he was still harbouring hopes that if his case came to court he might be acquitted. On July 20, however, the attempt by the conspirators on Hitler's life had been made – and failed. Now, there was no chance that anyone like Bonhoeffer would ever be released from prison while the Nazis were in power and moreover it was more than likely that along with many others the full scale of his 'treason' would be revealed, with the most dire consequences. This, then, was a watershed moment for Bonhoeffer. He knew that, humanly speaking, there was now nothing he could do: *'an end is put to your action'.*

The specific form of 'suffering' that Bonhoeffer is talking about here is therefore the loss of power to act as he had known before – a loss which looked like being permanent. During Passiontide we think of how Jesus on the way to Jerusalem repeatedly told his disciples that he too was going to be 'given up into the hands of men.'

Bible Reading

The Way to Freedom Week 5: Suffering (Passion)

The loss of power and capability: nowhere is this kind of suffering more poignantly expressed than in the Book of Job. Look at chapters 29 and 30 – better still, have one person read aloud chapter 29 and another person chapter 30. Job has suffered many things, recounted at the start of the book. But as conveyed in the contrast between these two chapters what is the heart of his anguish?

At first sight, it seems totally contradictory to all our natural instincts and understanding, to say that suffering is a step towards greater freedom, particularly that suffering which involves the loss of our power to act. In our time especially in the social and political areas, empowerment is the great watchword, disempowerment the great evil. Yet those who struggle for justice often have to do so at the cost of their own freedom. Or, might we say that it is by being willing to lose our normal 'freedom' in the cause of justice that an even deeper kind of freedom is expressed? Those who like Nelson Mandela endured long years of incarceration on Robben Island were not only standing for freedom but already were standing in freedom by their refusal to be intimidated or give in to the forces of oppression which could not control their spirit. In that sense they were already living free from apartheid.

What other examples of this kind of freedom in suffering come to mind?

Bonhoeffer's poem, however, points to yet another dimension of suffering as a stage on the way to freedom. Let us approach this with some more Bible study.

Bible Input

John 21:15-19: Jesus and Peter

15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' ¹⁶ A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.' ¹⁸ Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' ¹⁹ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'

Interpretation

Here the risen Jesus renews Simon Peter's fellowship with himself and commands him to tend his 'flock', the Church, as Jesus' under-shepherd. But this leadership role given to Peter does not remove from him any of the demands of being a disciple. The final

The significance of this appears in verse 18: '... when you were younger ... But when you grow

old ...' As so often in John's Gospel what can be read as a simple matter-of-fact statement can also carry a deeper significance.

command is the simple, stark call which has always been first in the Gospel story: 'Follow me'.

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Interpretation (cont.)

Jesus may be simply contrasting the freedom of the younger man to dress as he pleases and go where he wills, with the constricting problems of old age. But the reference to Peter's hands being stretched out, and to being bound and taken where he does not wish to go, can also be a description of the kind of death – crucifixion – that is in store for Peter. Either way it is a death which is the culmination of weakness and helplessness, of being at the mercy of others, and as such (verse 19) it is the kind of death by which he will glorify God. This theme of the revelation of the glory of God in Jesus shines throughout John's Gospel. At the beginning we read that in the Word made flesh 'we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth' (1.14). The 'signs' that Jesus performs successively point to his 'glory'. But that glory is to be fully disclosed only at the end. As the story nears its climax, on the night of his betrayal and arrest Jesus prays 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you . . . ' (17.1). By any human reckoning it is a very strange glorifying that is about to take place: a humiliating and shameful death by crucifixion. But, to those to whom it is being revealed in faith, this is indeed how God is glorified. Such a death is the only adequate way for God to show who he actually is: the everlastingly holy, absolutely loving and self-giving God. Jesus and his Father thus 'glorify' each other in their mutual relationship which on earth comes to its 'glorious' climax in the cross. Simon Peter is now offered his own part in this drama of God's glory appearing on earth. A suffering after the pattern of Jesus' own suffering will likewise reflect who God is, the one who is utterly to be trusted and obeyed come what may, and who will assuredly accomplish his purpose of bringing all things to the end that he desires and yearns for.

Theologian John Marsh comments:

*'... John portrays in his own characteristic and powerful symbolism how the risen Lord would find his disciples in their resumption of life in the secular world, and would there empower them to complete his universal mission, in the mystery and power of that laying down of life which had seemed to men the shame and defeat of the cross, but which to the Lord and his community was the manifestation of the glory of the eternal God.'*²



There comes a point, therefore, when 'action' is not so much a matter of our doing, performed in our strength to maximum effect, but of our letting go and entrusting to God all that we have been and have done, to bear fruit according to his will. That letting go of our own efforts is an experience of freedom: in Bonhoeffer's words, when we 'lay what is righteous calmly and fearlessly into a mightier hand, contented.' Notice however that this comes after the stages of 'discipline' and 'action'. It's the assurance given when we realise we can do no more. It comes as part of suffering. It's not a justification for not acting at all, or a pretext for laziness!

2 Corinthians 12:1-10: Paul's Visions and Revelations

It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.

*Bible Study
continued overleaf...*

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2 Corinthians 12:1-10:

Paul's Visions and Revelations (cont.)

5 On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. *6* But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, *7* even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. *8* Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, *9* but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. *10* Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Interpretation

The issue between Paul and the church at Corinth – of which he was the founding apostle – is one of power, prestige, and authority. Some other leaders have appeared on the scene, evidently also claiming to be apostles and even boasting that they have better credentials than Paul himself. Some of the Corinthian Christians are going along with them. Paul is being subjected to unfavourable comparisons with these 'apostles': he's not capable of performing such miraculous signs and wonders, not as powerful and eloquent in speech, exhibits not so great strength of personality, is not so impressive a 'presence' and so on. Paul's response is almost jocular:

'OK, if it's boasting that we're into, here goes' and proceeds to tell (as if it were somebody else) of his own extraordinary supernormal experience when he was *'caught up to the third heaven'*.

But this elation was followed by a quite other experience, 'a thorn was given me in the flesh' which he also attributes

ultimately to God. Quite what this 'thorn' was is not clear – many commentators have suggested some particularly painful, repulsive or debilitating illness. Others have suggested that after such a marvellous experience of 'heaven' merely the resumption of ordinary life – coming down to earth with a bump – would be enough of a kind of suffering in itself.

Either way, Paul learns his lesson from the Lord: *'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness'* (v9). This transforms the whole understanding of what is strength or power, of what we have to 'boast of' as followers and servants of Christ (verses 9-10). What at first seems just to be a personal issue between Paul and the Corinthian Church is turned by Paul into something far more fundamental, universal and revolutionary for human relationships and the exercise of 'power'.

We may well feel that the notion of 'power made perfect in weakness' obviously contradicts a lot of what goes on in the world.

But how does the behaviour of our churches themselves look in the light of Paul's teaching?

What for example would Paul be saying about our concern for 'mission' in today's society?

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Suffering: Part of Life?

In one sense, the martyr has it easy. The reason for his or her suffering is very apparent, as is the cost of suffering for any just cause. But for most of us, suffering comes as the unfortunate but almost inescapable accompaniment of life in all sorts of ways, which can seem cruel or unfair: illness, unemployment, loss of relationships through bereavement or other circumstances, ageing . . . That it seems 'only to be expected' does not make it any pleasanter or even more understandable. Many people give the immensity of suffering they see around them, or have experienced themselves, as the chief reason why they cannot believe in God. At best, it just doesn't make sense. At worst, it must mean an indifferent if not cruel God in charge of everything. Can we really say that suffering is a *'stage on the way to freedom'*?

Well, let's at least hear what some people have to say, who know what they're talking about as far as suffering is concerned.

Isobel de Gruchy is a South African poet and artist, and some years ago was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease.

My Prayer as a Person with Parkinson's Disease

*My legs and my hands may be shaky,
but may my courage and
my faith be firm.*

*My muscles may become stiff and hard to move,
but may my mind not become inflexible,
nor my heart unmoved.*

*I might lose my balance,
but may I continue to be balanced
in outlook and personality.*

*My hand-writing may become small and squiggly,
but may I never become small-
or woolly-minded.*

*My face may take on a deadpan look,
but may I always be able to express
joy, love and peace.*

*My movements may become slower and slower,
and may I also become slow to get irritated
and lose my cool.*

*My voice may become very soft and croaky,
but may I not give up on
communicating with others.*

*And may I never lose the vital spark
That is me.³*



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What is it about Isobel's poem that strikes you most? What is it that is most important to her?

What part do her relationships play in what she hopes and prays for?

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Sally

Here is another 'testimony'. Sally is in her 70s, and she writes:

I have yet to meet anyone who has not been affected by suffering.

I was born and raised in Devon by loving, caring parents. How different my life would have been had I been part of a Third World family, where hunger, disease and poverty prevail, and suffering abounds on a daily basis.

My dearest husband Ron knew about suffering. His first wife died after years of illness and he had had to do everything for her. When we first met, he was on crutches from his fourth back operation, following a fall down a flight of concrete steps whilst helping someone carry their heavy parcel for them. Our first meeting was love at first sight, and we married in June 1988. We were so happy. Too happy perhaps. In my prayers I started asking God to keep me well, as I couldn't bear the thought of this wonderful husband having to look after another sick wife.

Eight years later, the bottom fell out of our world when Ron was diagnosed with terminal brain tumours and given 6-9 months. In and out of the hospital, undergoing chemo and radiology, he was remarkably brave, never once complaining. One night however, this man of simple but strong faith became very upset as he just couldn't remember the Lord's Prayer. So I bought him a cross and chain and put it around his neck, suggesting to just hold the cross at prayer time, and God would hear his unspoken words.

Ron died at home with me 8 months later in April 1997.

Two and a half years on, I was diagnosed with AML, the most aggressive type of leukaemia, and told that without immediate treatment, just 2-3 months to live. I was immediately admitted to the same hospital, and put into an isolation room where I spent the next 7 months. That first night I thanked God for "postponing" this illness and keeping me healthy to look after Ron. My family and friends, together with my Church family were wonderful and they "carried me" with all their prayers and cards. Very thin, completely bald – not a pretty sight – yet at my weakest time, my faith was somehow stronger than ever.

My Consultant Han was incredible, explaining everything and being totally honest with me. One day in April, he told me my bone marrow was terrible, but he continued, suggesting an autologous transplant, but that it would be very risky. If it worked it could prolong my life, but that there was no guarantee and that I could die. Now Han had once told me I was to be his last patient, as he was going to America to concentrate solely on leukaemia research with no patient involvement. Something told me he would not be leaving England "on a loser".

The operation was to take place on May 1st, so during April I was encouraged to go for walks within the hospital, at night when nobody was about to protect against any infection. On the night of Good Friday, masked and well wrapped up, I set off for the Chapel, thinking, as I approached, of Mary's suffering as she watched her beloved son die – in a way remembering all parents who have had such a cross to bear.

Postscript: Outside the Chapel was a large wooden cross, draped with a white cloth, above which Sally's former minister adds: "She was that crown of thorns. I stood before it and cried. How our Lord Jesus had suffered for us all. Waking early on Easter Day, I cried – this time, tears of joy – has used her experience the Resurrection. Suffering will always be in our lives, but I believe compassion, joy and faith will always be here too. of being ill to minister to others in our congregation who have had cancers etc. She has been active with our Meeting for Marriages where we counsel those preparing for marriage - in my time about 50-60 couples per year." Finally, you've guessed – the transplant worked. Not a cure, but 10 years on I'm still in remission. I thank God for his gifts of life, and love.

What for you is the most striking sentence in Sally's account?

What do you think Sally teaches us about:

The nature of faith? What we can expect from God?

How God can use our weakness? The part others play in our sufferings, and we in theirs?

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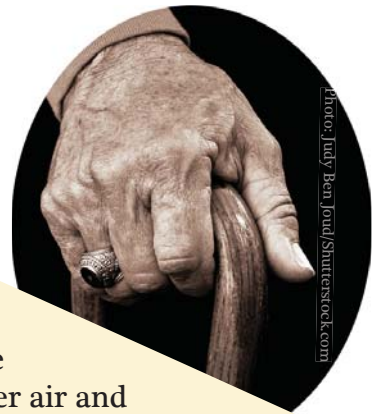
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Faith and Suffering

In his prison writings Bonhoeffer speaks of faith as a life in which 'one throws oneself completely into the arms of God . . . living fully in the midst of life's tasks, questions successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. . . 'taking seriously 'no longer one's own sufferings but rather the suffering of God in the world.'⁴

We might also wish to reflect on what both Isobel and Sally have written, in conjunction with these thoughts of Bonhoeffer penned around the same time as *Stations on the Way to Freedom*:
Everything we may with some good reason expect or beg of God is to be found in Jesus Christ. What we imagine a God could or should do – the God of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with all that. We must immerse ourselves again and again, for a long time and quite calmly, in Jesus' life, his sayings, actions, suffering, and dying in order to recognize what God promises and fulfils. What is certain is that we may always live aware that God is near and present with us and that this life is an utterly new life for us; that there is nothing that is impossible anymore because there is nothing that is impossible for God; that no earthly power can touch us without God's will, and that danger and urgent need can only drive us closer to God. What is certain is that we have no claim on anything but may ask for everything; what is certain is that in suffering lies hidden the source of our joy, in dying the source of our life; what is certain is that in all this we stand within a community that carries us. To all this God has said Yes and Amen in Jesus.⁵

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When You Were Younger... But When You Are Old...

We all hope for a long, happy and 'fulfilled' life. More and more of us in the western world are in fact living longer, thanks to better medical care, cleaner air and generally (one trusts) healthier lifestyles. But as the saying goes, 'Old age never comes on its own', and if we live longer then we shall have to prepared for a progressive, if gradual, loss of physical and mental powers. This is going to be a challenge both to us as individuals and to society as a whole.

For the first time, the UK has more people of pensionable age than children under 16, the officer for National Statistics has revealed:

"Confirmation of the ageing nature of Britain's population comes as the decline in mortality rates seen in the second half of the twentieth century has accelerated during the last decade. The number of people of state pensionable age, currently 65 for men and 60 for women, rose by 1.9 per cent last year to 11.58 million. They account for 19 per cent of the population, overtaking the 11.5 million children under the age of 16. The statisticians also identified the over-80s as the fastest-growing age group, saying they accounted for over 5 per cent – or 2.7 million of the population. Whilst increasing longevity is a fact with the average Briton getting older, one of the major downsides is that people are facing longer periods of ill health in later life. Consequently, we must face up to the reality of an ageing population. In 20 years' time it is estimated that 2 million more people will need help with dressing, washing, shopping, eating and other daily tasks"

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Spirituality of Ageing?

Most of the public discussion so far has been on the economic aspects of the challenge – for example the question of how a relatively smaller work force can support such an increasing pensionable and socially dependent population. But there is also the question of how we view ourselves as ageing people, suffering the gradual loss of abilities we used to take for granted.

Can this in any way be seen as a stage towards freedom?

Do we need a spirituality of ageing?

And what does this mean for the Church as a community of care and support?

To Do

See if someone over 70 can be interviewed in your group by someone under 20, on such questions as, 'What was it like for you to be the age I am now?'; 'Have you in any way become freer as a result of getting older?'; 'What do you wish you'd known about when you were my age, that you know now?'

Look at one or more of your current church hymn books. How many hymns can you find which deal directly with ageing?

What one thing would you like your church to be doing to show it is facing up to this problem of an ageing population, creatively and hopefully?

References

- ¹ 3rd verse, 'Stations on the Way to Freedom'. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison Bonhoeffer Works Vol. 8 (Fortress Press 2009), p513.
- ² John Marsh, The Gospel of Saint John (Penguin 1968), p660.
- ³ Isobel de Gruchy, In Well and in Woe. Poems. Published privately, Volmoed, Hermanus, South Africa 2010.
- ⁴ Letters and Papers from Prison, p486.
- ⁵ Letters and Papers from Prison, p514.

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