

Explore the Bible: Alert Living

October 11, 2016

• *The Explore the Bible lesson for Oct. 30 focuses on 1 Peter 5:1-11.*

The first thing I do at funerals is thank those who have come to be with the family in the moment. I remind them they will be the arms, the hands and the shoulders of the presence of Christ in the lives of those who grieve.

For one thing, they remind the bereaved they are not alone in their grief. Virtually everyone among those gathered has lost someone they loved. They remind the bereaved by their presence they are not suffering alone, and facing this test of faith can be done only in community with others who have suffered—even if they have no words of comfort.

‘The brotherhood of the bereaved’

“You know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering,” Peter reminds his audience in verse 9. The suffering may be caused simply by being human. John Claypool said upon the death of his 11-year-old daughter to leukemia, “No one lives long without being initiated into the brotherhood of the bereaved.”

That brotherhood is the source of God’s grace in times of suffering and temptation. A friend of mine attends three AA meetings per week. He’s been sober more than a decade but knows the temptation and tests go on. He refuses even to attempt to face it without the brotherhood of those who have also suffered the never-ending test of addiction.

In this particular text, it appears Peter is referring specifically to the kind of suffering we experience because we are following Jesus. People who follow Jesus tend to rile those who don’t because, if we are faithful, it highlights their unfaithfulness. We can’t know that for sure, but it is worth

considering and can lead to a more compassionate response.

Humbled people admit they don't want to suffer alone

Whatever the source of the suffering, being a part of the brotherhood, or community, of those who have suffered involves “clothing” ourselves with humility (v. 5). Peter’s warning is harsh. “God opposes the proud,” (v. 5). At first, this sounds like a lack of compassion from the One we know to be the “God of all mercies,” (2 Corinthians 1:3). There is another way of seeing it.

God cannot do for us what only God can do until we are humble enough to acknowledge that simple fact. It is only human to withdraw into solitude in times of suffering. Yet in that solitude we must finally admit the strength to go on comes only from God, who cannot provide that strength until we surrender to it.

With rarest exception, God provides that grace and that strength through the community of faith. It is rarely fully experienced in solitude. Humility involves removing ourselves from isolation and confessing to another believer we can't do the suffering alone.

When we are so ill 911 is summoned, we rarely have a choice in the care we will receive. Others take over our needs during our incapacitated state. However, the choice to admit our incapacity while we are still able to walk and talk on our own is one of the most difficult of Christian disciplines.

Grace to endure suffering

Once we have decided we are absolutely powerless, a grace comes into our lives that never would have been present otherwise. “God gives grace to the humble,” (v. 5). God gives what no human resource can supply, a grace to endure suffering—whether that suffering is caused because of our faithfulness to God or simply because we are enduring our human frailty.

More than once, as a hospice and pediatric chaplain, I have encountered some of the most heartbreaking situations I've ever seen in ministry.

Among other things, the grace God supplies in our suffering means the suffering won't ultimately be meaningless. This is one of the main themes of Romans 8, that God is using even the worst that happens to us to shape us more in the image of Christ.

This also is the theme of the beautiful words in v. 10 of this text: "After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you."

These verses promise those who suffer for Christ so very much. The suffering will not ultimately define us as much as, through grace, shape us to be more like Christ.

Those who surrender in humility to Christ in their suffering ultimately tend to testify the suffering they experienced was only one chapter in the longer story of being remade in the image of the Christ who suffered and thereby redeemed us.

Glen Schmucker is a hospice and pediatric hospital chaplain in Fort Worth.