



Dan's Divinities
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Journeying Through the Valleys of Life

I have yet to hear to hear anyone say how much they enjoyed the recent Arctic blast we experienced. No one says that it was a thrill to be without electricity for many hours, to be without water, to live in a house without heat, or to have burst pipes and flooded homes. No one who has been in the hospital on a respirator with COVID-19 says that it was a wonderful experience that they would like to repeat someday. No one who has lost a job due to the pandemic says they really enjoy unemployment and economic need. Although some say life is much better after their divorce, no one wants to go through the experience of an unhappy marriage and divorce. No one genuinely enjoys suffering, but all of us experience it to some degree or another.

Even Jesus did not want to suffer. Before going to the cross, he prayed, "My Father, if it's possible, take this cup of suffering away from me" (Matthew 26:39a, CEB). He did not want to suffer pain, agony, humiliation, and death. But that was not the end of his prayer. He continued, "However – not what I want but what you want" (Matt. 26:39b). Did the Father want Jesus to suffer? No, of course not. But he did want to show us how much he loves us and win our salvation. To do that, Jesus had to suffer upon the cross. For the Resurrection to happen, it had to be preceded by the cross.

Jesus was tempted to avoid suffering. After Simon Peter made the Great Confession that Jesus was the Messiah (Mark 8:29), Jesus began to teach his disciples what being the Messiah meant. "Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed. . ." (Mark 8:31). But this prediction of what the Messiah would undergo was much different from the expectation of Simon Peter, the disciples, and most of the Jewish people, who thought of the Messiah in terms of victory, glory, and God-provided ease. So, Peter began to rebuke Jesus for his negative thinking and incorrect theology. To adopt Peter's vision of being the Messiah with glory and ease instead of suffering was tempting to Jesus, but he knew it was not God's plan. So, turning to face not just Simon Peter, but

all his disciples, he said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (Mark 8:29).

We, along with the Twelve Disciples, often suffer from the illusion that Jesus came to rescue us from all suffering. We think that if we can just align ourselves with Jesus, then we will be saved from all the bad stuff of life and receive only the good stuff. But Jesus indicated that his all his followers would have to suffer. Notice in the following verse that He addressed his teaching not only to the Twelve, but to all who wanted to follow him: "After calling the crowd together with his disciples, Jesus said to them, 'All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. . .'" (Mark 8:34, CEB). Crosses were instruments of suffering, torture, and execution. It is not that our loving Father wants any of us to suffer, it is that he wants us to be faithful to him in our hearts and in our witness to the world during our sufferings, just like Jesus was. To follow Jesus, we must be willing use our faith to cope with our suffering and not expect that our faith exempts us from suffering.

Some years ago, there was a medical missionary serving in Egypt. He was perplexed that many of the people he loved and served there suffered from a life-sapping anemia. All of his efforts to treat this disease failed. Finally, he learned that the anemia was caused by a parasitic flatworm, known as a liver fluke. These flukes lived in the soil of the riverbank along the Nile and got into people's systems through the water. To find a cure, the missionary gathered a sample of the parasite and flew with it to the U.S. to have it analyzed at Johns Hopkins Medical School. However, when he landed in Washington, U.S. Immigration officials refused to permit him to bring the liver flukes into the country. He explained the situation and pleaded his case, but the immigration officers stood firm. Finally, defeated, the missionary went to the men's room to dispose of the flukes. But then he remembered his friends in Egypt. Without any hesitation he drank the contents of the jar containing the flukes and entered the country. He spent the next five years struggling to stay alive, but in receiving treatment for the anemia himself here in America, he was able to provide the medical community with the specimens they needed to find a cure for his Egyptian friends.

We cannot always escape suffering and pain. Sometimes we even enter into it knowingly and willingly. Our suffering is a call to faith in One bigger than our pain. It is a call to faith in One who suffered and died on a cross for us.