

THE LESSON OF ISRAEL'S SUFFERINGS

The recent conflict in Gaza has caused many to wonder why God allows such suffering to apparently innocent people. But pain and suffering is not just the experience of those in Gaza or for those on the end of HAMAS missiles in Israel. Pain and suffering as the result of injustice brought on by corrupt or inept governments is the lot for millions today, as it has been down through the ages.

But why, if one believes that Israel is God's Chosen people, has God allowed them in particular, to suffer so much and for so long? Surely if they are truly His people, is God not guilty of indifference or maybe impotence? This is the view taken by many leading Jewish thinkers especially in response to the Holocaust.

Richard Rubenstein a former Liberal Rabbi said, *"To believe in God after Auschwitz is not only unreasonable but it is indecent."* He goes on, *"We have all lost hope, consolation and illusion. History means chaos and the universe makes no sense. Man is left an orphan and the values he needs he must create himself. This does not mean that religion must end but man must reconstruct religion without God."* Many intellectuals take the same view.

Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits writes from an orthodox view. His first effort is to try and justify God's ways before men. He focuses upon essential Human Freedom without which man is not man but finds it difficult to exonerate God for responsibility

as creator as well as Lord. He believes in God's sovereignty yet cannot explain God's length of absence and failure to intervene. He admits to the difficulty this presents but believes it demands Faith that God is all wise in all He does and what He allows to happen. He lines up with Job – contending with God whilst trusting in Him.

Nobel Peace prize winner Elie Weisel, a survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, can really be called the 20th C Job. He does not deny God's existence but he does protest His absence. His deepest problem is the silence of God. He accuses God of indifference. Weisel is torn by the ambivalence as he confronts the void. For him, to contemplate God is intolerable – but to reject God is unthinkable.

To try and talk with any special people group without understanding something of the way they think and behave is foolish indeed. Not least then, as we seek to pray and bring comfort and 'good news' to Israel should we not also take care and prepare ourselves. And where better to go than to God's Word as we seek for real understanding of how He deals with the world and His people in particular.

In **Exodus 3:1-12** we read the conversation between God and Moses at the Burning Bush as God begins to implement His work of Israel's deliverance. *"I have surely seen the oppression of My people."* He has listened to their cry and *"...I know their sorrows."* 3:7 But why did it have to go on for so long? What was the purpose of Israel's suffering in Egypt? Why didn't God step in and deliver them as soon as it started. It may have seemed like a lifetime for William Wilberforce to get his Anti-Slavery Bill through a reluctant and obstructive Parliament. In fact it took but 25 years. For Israel it took best part of 400 years before they were set

free. Other social injustices never seem to get sorted out. Look today at Zimbabwe, Sudan, Congo, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, and so many countries in the Muslim world. *“Man is born for trouble...”* Job 5:7

What had happened to Israel? Answer - Israel had settled down in Egypt - Become assimilated - Decided to enjoy the blessings of a square meal, work and happiness but forgot who they were and their unique calling by God. And so, they were about to enter a darkness Abraham describes in Gen 15:12 as God cuts covenant. The people of Israel were trying to live as if they were just the same as everyone else. But God declares them to be different. And what's more, the same is true for us. When God comes into our lives, we are never going to be the same again. We no longer belong to ourselves - We belong to God and the consequence of this is that the world hates us. It hates us because it hates God. But Israel wanted to be left alone, left to get on with life and be liked - Don't we all?

You cannot be the unique people living in a strange land. Israel needed a land of their own to demonstrate to the world what it means to live in relationship with God. They were to show the world that a people under God live and behave differently because God is among them. THE SAME APPLIES TO US. But we also have to recognise that we are living as strangers in a strange land where in the main people hate God. In our own homes and families and in the workplace God wants us to demonstrate a different set of laws at work. If we refuse, then we are no different from the world but in the end God will do what it takes to get us out of that world. That's what He was about to do for Israel – because He loved them too much to leave them where they were.

God brings in judgment. In the end God delivers them suddenly – at a stroke – with mighty signs and wonders. Heb – ‘Nes’ a banner or miracle. A sign that God is loving but mighty through His judgments and Egypt took note, recognising that this was “... the finger of God.” Isaiah 26:9 puts it this way, *“For when your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.”* God would deliver Israel out of Egypt with mighty signs and wonders involving the death of many ‘innocent’ citizens. But that would be the easy bit. It would take a lot longer to get Egypt out of them.

For many – it proved to be an impossible task. Most of them fell in the wilderness. But out of the suffering God brings forth something precious. Doesn't every mother know this to be true? Why is pain associated with birth? Perhaps because the new baby might not be so appreciated otherwise. When you know that you have almost died for something, it creates a bond, that could not have been achieved otherwise. It etches onto your whole life that this child is precious and you will ensure that it is given all the necessary help to bring it to maturity. That's how God considered Israel. Hosea 11:1 says prophetically, *“When Israel was a Child, I loved Him and out of Egypt called My Son.”* In the end the suffering produces a thankful heart because it was impossible for Israel to save themselves. They needed a Saviour – a deliverer and so do we.

“I have come down to deliver.” 3:8 Not just to get them ‘OUT’ of trouble but to transfer them ‘INTO’ a new land. Out of Egypt but into the promised land, so that the people could become a nation. Deliverance is never meant to be into a vacuum. In Luke 11:24-26 Jesus tells of the house that was swept clean but because it did not become occupied, the unclean spirit returned and brought seven

other demons with him, so that the end was worse than the beginning.

God never promised to stop the suffering if that meant that they could continue living the way they always did. Deliverance was so that they might be a grateful people, dwelling in their own land but with a different heart attitude to their brand new life. The pain and suffering was the only way to make them an appreciative people with a determination that they would never get into the same situation again. The best way to make sure they would not slide back was to put them into a different place - a place of Gods choosing.

“I will send you.” 3:10 God would deliver them in supernatural ways but the mouthpiece He would use to communicate to Pharaoh was Moses. He says, “That YOU might bring My People out of Egypt”. God would be there to support Moses faith with signs and wonders that would bring great pain and anguish upon every Egyptian – women and children included. But Moses would be the man for the hour - and that’s the bit he and we all find so difficult - That God has always chosen to use human beings as His spokesmen and priests for the people. People who had shown their ability to discern right from wrong. Jer 15:19

But here is another question. Exodus 1: 7-10 shows that the Egyptians were clearly afraid of the rise of Israel. But why did Egypt ‘fear’ Israel in their midst. And over the centuries why indeed have cultured and secure nations feared the Jews? Why Did Hitler fear and then hate the Jews? It seems that success, growth, prosperity, health and maybe many more issues influenced the Egyptians to realise that God’s blessing was upon them and if they didn’t try to do something about it, maybe they might see themselves overrun by these ‘immigrants.’

It seems that because the blessing of God is upon them, jealousy and hatred are stirred up in the hearts of unbelievers. It started back in Gen 26:14 for Isaac where the Philistines envied him and continues to this day. Not only for that reason but also because from the Jews, salvation would come to the whole world. Jn 4:22. God would bring deliverance to them and to the whole world by ‘suffering and dying’ in their place and at the end of the age He would come again to ensure that the earth be filled with the knowledge of the Lord. Hitler thought he had a Final Solution to the ‘Jewish problem’ but God has a better FINAL SOLUTION and His Name is Jesus.

Conclusion - Gods love is strangely tied up with His judgments. Jn 3:16 records that text known to so many, “For God so loved the world...” But in 1 Jn 2:15 it appears to be quite contradictory by stating, “Love not the world nor the things in the world...” Is God contradictory? No – but the answer is that God loves in a way that is very different to us. His love and judgments are interwoven. Our love is so sentimental and self centred. Read Isaiah 26:9 again. The sign of God’s love is that He has brought and will bring terrible judgment and calamity to this world in order to rescue it from Satan’s grip. Even then, men will still cry out in bitter rage and anguish. There is a battle going on for control of the world but in particular the hearts and minds of every created being. Sometimes we really need to take the focus off our own situations which so often we get completely out of proportion and look at the big picture where God is beginning to shake everything that can be shaken in the earth.

Job 5; 10; 13:5 “Though He slay me yet will I trust Him”. Job knew that this life was not all there is. His hope was in God 19:25-26 and despite the things that are about to take place on the earth that is where our hope needs to be also.

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