

March 2005

Dearest Friends and Collaborators,

I wrote you some time ago about the “major” and “minor” themes found in scripture. The major theme is resurrection, life, breakthrough, triumph. The minor theme is crucifixion, suffering, darkness, loss. Both have a place in scripture, because both have a place in our lives. Yet one is to be major, the other minor. I reported with sadness that in our post-modern culture, the minor theme has become the major theme. It’s cool to talk about confusion, the “dark night of the soul,” how hard life is. It feels “relevant,” “edgy” and much safer to talk about our struggles than it does to talk about breakthrough.

Part of the reason we don’t talk about breakthrough is that it sounds Pollyannaish in a world crushed by the amount of suffering ours has right now. But perhaps the deeper reason is that we don’t have breakthrough stories to tell. For if we did, wouldn’t we want to offer them to those in such dire need? But I rush ahead. What I wanted to write you about was the place of suffering, and breakthrough.

“Arm yourselves for suffering,” Peter warned us (1 Peter 4:1). Meaning, first, it will come. To everyone. Don’t let it blow you away. That is suffering’s worst cut – that it knocks our legs out from under us, sends us reeling. We wonder, *Did I do something wrong?* And we also wonder, *Where is God? Why is he allowing this?* It adds suffering upon suffering, this being-knocked-off-center by suffering itself. Arm yourselves, says Peter. First, by knowing it will come. Suffering comes to all of us. You haven’t been singled out. It’s not something you’ve called down upon yourself. Even Jesus suffered.

But *whence* does it come, from whose hand, and for what purpose? *Those* are questions worth asking, worth staying with until we have answers.

Sometimes suffering is simply from the school of hard knocks, the school of wisdom. You drank too much; now you are paying. *I’ll never do that again.* Exactly. Lesson learned. This is the path of wisdom, being confronted with reality. This is how we learn many things.

Yes, sometimes suffering comes from the hand of God, to refine us. “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word” (Psalm 119:67). Like nothing else suffering *disrupts us*, exposes all sorts of things beneath the surface of our lives. Sometimes it exposes our unbelief, as when Job says *I knew it – I knew this would happen to me.* We have a chance to repent of our unbelief. Perhaps it exposes some deep commitment to find security apart from God, as when we suffer a financial loss. We are faced with a choice; we have been exposed. We ask the Spirit to search us, and lead us in repentance. Don’t waste your pain, as Allender says. Let it make you holy.

Sometimes God uses suffering to reveal an old wound, to surface old agreements we made. *I’ll never trust anyone again.* That which was laid down in pain (in the past) can often only be accessed by pain (in the present). In the rawness of the new wound, we access older unhealed

wounds – so that we might renounce those old vows, turn from our self-protective ways, and invite the healing work of Christ into these places.

*However*, an idea that has taken root in the church which has led many good people to accept every blow that comes is from the heart of God towards them. Dallas Willard thinks this is nonsense.

What we learn about God from Jesus should prove to us that suffering and “bad things” happening to us are not the Father’s preferred way of dealing with us – sometimes necessary, perhaps, but never what he would, on the whole, prefer. ...The last request in the Lord’s Prayer is the revelation of a God who loves to spare his children and who will *always* do it upon request unless he has something better in mind, which he rarely does. (*Divine Conspiracy*)

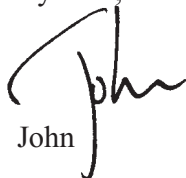
Not God’s preferred way of dealing with us??? Wow. Then...where does most of this suffering come from? What are its intentions? Exactly. Those are the questions to ask.

More often than not, suffering comes because you live in a world that has undergone a great Fall, a disaster, a world deeply marred. Sometimes, suffering comes from the hand of the Enemy, in which case we are told to fight back! “Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (1 Peter 5:9). Even in cases where suffering is intended for our good, we are to be shaped by it *and then move on* – pass through it to the fields of wholeness and holiness. We are never meant to simply accept it as our lot. As MacDonald wrote,

Let us in all the troubles of life remember – that our one lack is life – that what we need is more life – more of the life-making presence in us making us more, and more largely, alive. Let us rouse ourselves to live. Of all things let us avoid the false refuge of a weary collapse, a hopeless yielding to things as they are...he has the victory who, in the midst of pain and weakness, cries out...for strength to fight; for more power, more consciousness of being, more God in him. (*Unspoken Sermons*)

When suffering comes, I find myself watching to see, *What does this expose in me?* Some need for deeper holiness? Some need for healing? I watch to see if God is after something. And I also watch closely for the intentions of my enemy. Through repentance at times, and healing in others, through defiant resistance at other times (and quite often a mixture of all three *most* times!) I look for breakthrough. When breakthrough tarries, I find myself asking why, *What is in the way?* I do not think that all suffering can be ended in this life. But we shall never know how much *can* be until we, dear friends, avoid the hopeless yielding to things as they are. Let us rouse ourselves to live.

By Him,



John