

Reconciling suffering and joy

Willy Mushagalusa

I am convinced that suffering plays a crucial role in forming our relationship with God; the way we respond to affliction shapes our ability to understand how God works in our lives. Our experiences of suffering may lead us to abandon faith, or we may become closer to God through them.

As Christians, we believe that at creation God envisioned a good life, free of anguish, for all God's creatures, until Adam and Eve succumbed to the temptations of the serpent, and disobeyed

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God. Since then, through forces such as conflict, poverty, disease, human exploitation, and racism, the powers of evil exert powerful influence on our existence. My question, then, is whether we can remain hopeful as we struggle with these forces, whether we can remain joyful during our times of affliction.

At first, reconciling suffering and joy seems impracticable, because suffering depletes human beings of our natural capacity to rejoice. Suffering is unpleasant, it makes us sad, and it exposes our vulnerability. For Christians it may shake our sense of a faith firmly founded on biblical promises, a basis for a joyful attitude.

When God does not intervene to bring relief

Like many Christians, I have experienced my share of suffering. When I faced pain, I questioned the accuracy of the scriptures that testify to the loving nature and the unsurpassed power of God. Throughout the Bible we read of a God who is concerned about the well-being of God's people, and I was and still am puzzled by the fact that God does not always intervene in my behalf, especially during difficult experiences. For example, when

I fled political instability in Congo and was in search of a secure life, my circumstances went from bad to worse, and I ended up living in a harsh and ruthless refugee camp for four years, before I finally got an opportunity to emigrate to Canada.

As I planned to settle peacefully in Canada, however, I received news that a brutal war was tearing my country of origin apart; the rest of my family was caught in a conflict that was destroying communities and sending more of my relatives to refugee camps. Then, during the same period, while I was a student at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, my wife gave birth to a premature baby, who survived a few weeks, then passed away. In an attempt to give a spiritual meaning to these unfortunate events, I encouraged myself by reciting Psalm 23 and quoting scriptural promises about how everything works for good for those who love God.

Despite the significance these passages had for me during that time, I felt confused by the contrast between God's revealed nature and an understanding of God as one who is present in the midst of my pain. During these events, I longed to understand why the scriptures declare that everything works for the good of those who love God, and why Christians' experiences of extreme suffering do not always end up as the story of Job does, with a delightful reversal of fortunes. I tried to pray, only to find that some prayers in times of affliction are not answered according to our expectations.

Because the divine resources that I was counting on did not appear to be adequate to the intensity of my struggles, I became emotionally, physically, and even spiritually disturbed. This succession of trials complicated the way I related to a God who claims to be compassionate and powerful but who permitted a suffering that left me feeling defenseless. If God is powerful, I sometimes thought, he should have been able to intervene when I underwent this difficult time, as is the pattern in many biblical stories. Or he could have prevented them from happening.

To make matters worse, I had a sense of culpability, which arose from my familiarity with biblical passages that articulate a link between disobedience and God's judgment. In these biblical stories, judgment is often made concrete in the suffering of those who have sinned. Again and again I scrutinized my actions to find

out whether somewhere I was guilty of a sin that could possibly have been the cause of my trouble. All of these trials exposed my powerlessness to move beyond circumstances that were out of my control, even as I succumbed to the impulse to see God as distant and uncaring precisely when I most needed his presence, power, care, and intervention.

Glorifying the God who nurtures our joy

My sojourn in a refugee camp, one of the most difficult periods of my life, was at the same time a big factor in helping me develop an attitude of joy in the midst of troubles. We had a Christian group in the camp, with activities centered around worship and praise, using drums, clapping, and dancing. We lacked people adequately trained to preach and teach the Bible, so the group dedicated the largest part of our services to praise and worship. But those who led the group were able to develop a hermeneutic consistent with the realities of the refugee camp, and they understood that lively worship was necessary to sustain us amid such challenges.

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The group emphasized literal interpretation of the Bible. We found it easy to comprehend certain biblical stories. We appropriated the story of Paul and Silas singing through their night in jail, for example, because it helped us reflect on our situation. Through our reading of this story and our reflection on our experience, we came to believe that in difficult times, singing praises can play a crucial role. As we emphasized the acts of

God in these stories and in most of our worship time, our faith in God increased and our problems seemed to diminish.

In most African communities, drums, songs, and dancing have always been part of life and are still important both to jubilant celebrations and in grieving. By skillfully integrating these elements in our worship, we found respite from our miseries. And we gained the insight that through worship we could experience the One who is greater than our problems. We celebrated hope in the face of hopelessness, glorifying a God who nurtured our joy. That joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit that relieved our burdens and

demonstrated that God was still working among us. Such joy should not be confused with simple cheerfulness; it transcends tragic events that may afflict God's people. In praise our hearts were raised into the joyous presence and peace of God, as our worship provided a channel through which God's power could operate amid our struggles.

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The effects of the camp experiences are still embedded in my Christian consciousness and have become a point of reference every time I face new challenges. Through these experiences I have become aware that Christians are not immune to suffering, and even that Christ prepared his followers for suffering

by frequently mentioning it in his teachings. In fact, when his disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, he was careful to remind them that they should always ask God to deliver them from evil, a prayer that is still a cornerstone of Christian worship. Through a worshiping attitude that has sprung from suffering, every difficult experience I face is now endowed with new meaning and with hope that God is present all through our afflictions.

Reflecting on the role of God in his son's illness, Rabbi Harold Kushner writes that

*Christianity introduced the world to the idea of a God who suffers, alongside the image of a God who creates and commands.... I don't know what it means for God to suffer. I don't believe that God is a person like me with real eyes and real tear ducts to cry, and real nerve endings to feel pain. But I would like to think that the anguish I feel when I read of the suffering of innocent people reflects God's anguish and God's compassion, even if his way of feeling pain is different from ours."*¹

Apart from Christ's experience on the cross, I don't know what it means for God to suffer, but I know for sure that joy is one of God's characteristics. Because he wants us to be partakers of his nature, his joy can be passed on to us through the Holy Spirit, who is present among us in prayer and praise and worship, even—

or perhaps especially—when difficulties assail us from every direction.

Note

¹ Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 85.

About the author

Willy Mushagalusa is married to Ephemie and a father of two, a boy named Ahadi and a girl named Ashuza. He studied international development at Canadian Mennonite University, and he and his family attend the Fort Garry Mennonite Brethren Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba, while also reaching out to the African community in the area.