

On the Saints' Afflictions: A Primer

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"But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having urn over the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. But while the disciples stood around him, he arose and entered the city. And the next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe. And after they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, Through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God' " (Acts 14:19-22).

The Bible, being the revelation of God's redemptive grace, is "The Book of Salvation." But, it could with equal accuracy be called "The Book of Sorrows." From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible brings before us the hardships, persecutions, illnesses, and deaths of the saints.

There is a relationship between salvation and suffering. Jesus commends a cross to would-be disciples (Mark 8:34) and promises tribulation to actual followers (John 16:33). John Calvin puts it this way: "For whomever the Lord has adopted and deemed worthy of His fellowship ought to prepare themselves for a hard, toilsome, and unquiet life, crammed with very many and various kinds of evil" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.8.1).

Despite their excellence in suffering, however, the covenant people of God have always affirmed His loving kindness, righteousness, and power. In apologetics, a defense of this affirmation in the face of

evil is known as a *theodicy*. Many people produce theodicies to vindicate God before the world. That is not my purpose here. My purpose is to strengthen believers and encourage them in the faith by instructing them in that providence which often seems most severe—the providence of affliction.

Grief Comes to the Caylor Home

In December 1986, my wife, Nancy, gave birth to our third child, a son, Elijah Duane. It was her easiest labor and delivery, and although Elijah had a rash at birth—it seemed to be a common newborn dermatitis—he appeared to be a healthy baby. As time went on, however, rather than improving as expected, the rash worsened. Nancy spent hours each day washing bloodied sheets and applying creams and ointments to the large areas of alternately weeping and crusting skin on Elijah's head, trunk, and diaper area.

When he was four months old, we took him to a dermatologist. The dermatologist did a biopsy, which revealed a benign skin condition for which there was no cure, but which was supposed to improve with time.

So Nancy renewed her ministrations.

Elijah's condition worsened, however, and after several months, we consulted with a Christian pediatrician friend. A second biopsy was obtained. This time there was no benign skin disease. Elijah had histiocytosis X, a group of variably severe diseases often fatal in young children. The night we received the news, Nancy and I walked to my office to look for information on our son's illness. As we walked, we talked about the possibility—the *probability-of* saying goodbye to our year-old son.

It was not to be as simple as that. Elijah turned out to have an extremely rare form of histiocytosis X, a form

confined only to the skin and, therefore, non-lethal. Because of the rarity of his illness, Elijah was referred to the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics. Chemotherapy was initiated. After only a few weeks, our son seemed well. But, in July 1988, we experienced a setback when Elijah developed swelling behind his right eye. The swelling was evaluated in Iowa City, presumed to be indicative of systemic histiocytosis, and it responded quickly to a change in chemotherapy. So our son's physicians were still optimistic about his prognosis.

Then on Labor Day, Elijah could not bear weight on his legs. We took him back to Iowa City, where he was diagnosed with an infection in his hip, and he was started on IV antibiotics. His white blood cell count dropped, evidence of overwhelming infection, and his antibiotics were changed. Still, Elijah remained gravely ill. Finally, after several weeks of negative blood cultures-his condition worsening, his fever high, his white blood cell count dangerously low-a bone marrow biopsy was ordered. His doctors expected to find histiocytosis. Nancy was with Elijah at the time; I was in Manchester, 70 miles away, working 80-100 hours weekly and trying to coordinate care for our two daughters.

Elijah had been uncomfortable for days and had not been sleeping well. Consequently, as Nancy had been spending nights in his room, neither had she. When the oncologist brought the results of the bone marrow biopsy to my sleep-deprived wife, and she learned that Elijah did have bone marrow disease, but not histiocytosis X. Elijah had leukemia.

Nancy called me with the news and said, "I demanded to see God." I remembered Job's cry, "But I would speak to the Almighty, And I desire to argue with God" (Job 13:3). So began eleven weeks of venipunctures, lumbar punctures, chemotherapy, tube feedings, and pain medications for Elijah. So began eleven weeks of vigilance for Nancy and me. On the first Sunday in Advent, 1988, Elijah died.

My son's story is only one of many which could be told. I do not present it because it is atypical, but because it is so typical: It represents the trials we all endure. We

all know some pain; some know more pain than others. The quantity of suffering is unimportant. It is the quality of our suffering that counts, and God is determined that we should suffer well.

Purpose in Suffering- God As the Cause

If one were asked to give one reason for misery in the universe, I suspect that the reason most frequently given would be sin. And this answer would not be incorrect. All tribulation, disease, pain, frustration, and death can be traced back to the original transgression of our first parents. In this context, Donald Carson has called suffering "the effluent of the Fall." All the evil that has flooded over the world flows from the pollution of Eden (Romans 5:15-20). The adversity which dogs us throughout our lives is a consequence of rebellion against a just and holy God (Genesis 3).

But, there is another reason for epidemic tribulation, a reason which is "before" sin, so to speak. It is the reason for all reasons. It is the providence of God. By *providence*, I mean God's purpose and plan for the universe and His actions in history to accomplish the same, including the redemption of His elect. God's providence precedes sin: It is prior to sin in what philosophers call an ontologic sense; that is, sin is dependent on providence, it derives from providence, it is included within providence. *The Westminster Confession* (5.4) addresses the relationship between providence, and thus:

"The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God, so far manifest themselves in his providence, that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men, and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to His own holy ends; yet so as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God; Who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author and approver of sin" (I Samuel 2:25; I Kings 22:19-23; Psalm 76:10, Romans 9:18; II Thessalonians 2:11).

Since all that happens is grounded in the providence of