

The Elisabeth Elliot Newsletter

January/February 1984

Why Christians Suffer

So often people make remarks such as, "Isn't it strange how God allows such awful things to happen—and she's such a *good* person." So far I've found twelve explanations in scripture. It isn't all mystery, though of course God's permission of evil in the world is fathomless to us mortals. He has told us all we need to know, however, about the why's, and I hope to write about each of the answers in forthcoming issues.

The apostle Peter writes, "My friends, do not be bewildered by the fiery ordeal that is upon you, as though it were something extraordinary. It gives you a share in Christ's sufferings, and that is cause for joy." (1 Pt 4:12-13 New English Bible)

When we remember that Peter was writing his letter to exiles, we can try to imagine all the various kinds of suffering that involved. Peter had been through a few mills himself, and understood deeply how they were feeling, and the quite natural human tendency to be bewildered when you're in the middle of trouble. Don't be, he says. He does not deny that it is "fiery." He calls it an ordeal. That's honest. But he tells them it's nothing out of the ordinary. It is what all of us ought to expect, in one form or another, as long as we're following Christ. What else should we expect? He said we would have to give up the right to ourselves, take up His cross, and follow. He said we would have to enter the Kingdom "through much tribulation." We bargained for a steep and narrow road—why should we be be-

wildered to find it steep and narrow? The thrilling, heart-lifting truth which Peter speaks of is that in this very "ordeal," whatever it is, we are being granted an unspeakably high privilege: a share in Christ's sufferings, and that, Peter says, is cause for joy.

Sometimes people wonder how on earth *their* kind of trouble can possibly have anything to do with Christ's sufferings. Ours are certainly nothing in comparison with His. We are not being crucified. Our burden is certainly not the weight of the sins of the world. No. But in all our afflictions He is afflicted. We are together in them. If we receive them in faith—faith that they are permitted by a Father who loves us, faith that He has an eternal purpose in them—we can offer them back to Him for His transforming. If, like Paul, we want to know Him and the power of His resurrection, we must also know the fellowship of His sufferings. The only way to enter that fellowship is to suffer. Can we say *Yes, Lord*—even to that?

Footnotes on Suffering

When I wrote the piece on page one, I wasn't suffering, nor was anyone close to me that I knew of. Today a few more paragraphs have been asked for because of a change in format. My thoughts have been full of my mother. A bad fall a couple of weeks ago, headlong onto the sidewalk, had resulted only in a broken tooth, it seemed.

Alarming symptoms developed last week. Today she is in a hospital in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, following cranial surgery.

Tomorrow I will see her. What will I say, I, who know next to nothing of physical suffering? I can't speak firsthand of that, but never mind. The Lord took on Himself *all* of our pains, so His word stands sure of all of them. I will read her the piece on page one if she can listen, and ask the Spirit of God to cheer her. She has known the Lord and loved His word for about seventy years. He will not fail her now.

Yesterday as I prayed for her I thought of the words, "In Him we live and move and have our being." Why yes, I thought—even now, in her weakness and confusion, lying there with head swathed in bandages, bewildered about what has happened, where she is and why, Mother lives (however tenuously), moves (however weakly), and has her being *in Christ*. Nothing has changed with Him. He holds her in His hands, the hands that were wounded for her. He will not forget her or let her go. She is safe.

I fished out of my files a letter I had from a little boy, with a picture of himself—such a sweet, wistful face. "My grandmother has a brain tumor," he wrote, "and only has about six months to live. I'm really upset. Could you help me about this?"

How to help a child trust God in the face of fathomless mysteries? I couldn't *explain* the thing. I could only tell him that the Lord loves his grandmother more than he does. He loved Daniel and Joseph and Stephen and His own son, the Lord Jesus, and He let some terrible things happen to them *because* He had wonderful things in mind that were beyond men's most shining dreams. To go into a den of fierce lions, to be sold into slavery and then imprisoned, to be pelted with rocks or nailed to a cross—why? God gave us *some* explanations for those terrible things. You can find them in the Bible. He gives us hints about things like even a dear grandmother's tumor. "Make your requests known to me, my child," He says. "I'm listening. I love you. I love her. Then trust me to do the very best thing. In the end, you'll see—it's better than shining dreams." You must wait patiently for the Lord. He will strengthen your heart.

From *Passion and Purity*

How shall I speak of a few careless kisses as sin to a generation nurtured on the assumption that nearly everybody goes to bed with everybody? Of those who flounder in the sea of permissiveness and self-indulgence, are there any who still search the sky for the beacon of purity? If I did not believe there were, I would not bother to write.

Purity, I fear, has gotten mixed up in people's minds with the caricature of Puritanism, which, in the popular imagination, is a dour, brittle revolt against all the pleasures of the flesh. Puritans were in fact very earthy people, robust in their affirmation of life, not by any means "Victorian" (another word grossly misunderstood today in being made a synonym for all that is negative). Neither the concept of purity nor the doctrines of the Puritans deny life. Rather they refer back to the very Giver of Life Himself. Purity means freedom from contamination, from anything that would spoil the taste or the pleasure, reduce the power, or in any way adulterate what the thing was meant to be. It means cleanness, cleanness—no additives, nothing artificial—in other words, "all natural," in the sense in which the Original Designer designed it to be.

Can I say categorically that a kiss is a sin? I can say that it might be. I can say that it might take the edge off, spoil the taste and the pleasure later on. It might reduce power. It might distract the heart.

It is a powerful lie that, because sexual desire is natural, healthy, and God-given, anything I do because of that desire is natural, healthy, and God-given. "How can anything that feels so good be so bad?" "Intimacy is an act of worship," "Denying yourself the expression of that desire is dangerous—it's repression, it'll lead to perversion, etc." "Nobody can control all that fire when he's young." Lies, all of them.

Christians who are buying such rubbish today

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are without honor. They have lost the notions of fidelity, renunciation, and sacrifice—because nothing seems worth all that.

A sampler of chapters from *Passion and Purity*

- What Women Do to Men
- Me, Lord? Single?
- Passion Is a Battleground
- How Much Can a Kiss Tell You?
- Oozing Ache
- What to Do with Loneliness
- Honor above Passion

News of the Aucas

A clipping was sent to me last summer telling of the Ecuadorian government's granting title to the Auca Indians of some 66,000 hectares. This means that they will be allowed to live, hunt, and fish in that area. The Indians, said the newspaper, had "refused to understand" that the government would "give" them property which had always been the absolute possession of their ancestors. I can well imagine the bewilderment. I can picture the attempt to get them to participate in the official program when the Minister of Agriculture presents the title to them. It's a rerun, I'm afraid, of North American history. As a tribe the Aucas are doomed.

Dear Reader:

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Recommended Reading

William Kirk Kilpatrick: *Psychological Seduction*, Thomas Nelson, 1983

This is a book I've been waiting for. The author shows how psychology and Christianity are not by any means always compatible. Psychological jargon has infected the thinking of many Christians ("self-image," for example, has become as important as salvation; theism has been replaced by me-ism). Our society, Christian and otherwise, Kilpatrick shows, has been seduced. I want to say to everybody, "Drop everything and read this!" We need to be alerted to the ways in which the world around us squeezes us into its own mold. We need to start over and learn to think "Christianly."

Letters Received

"You'll be happy to know that I turned over my tardy habits to my Sunday School class to the Lord. That alone was a struggle. But He has helped me one Sunday at a time to be on time. So I have not been late since the conference. So I now I am trying to add next Sunday to the list."

Prayer Requests

- Pray for Lars and myself as we go to Australia in January for three weeks of speaking under the auspices of the Church Missionary Society in Katoomba and Melbourne, and under the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students in Canberra.
- We'll be visiting in February the work established in South India by Amy Carmichael, called the Dohnavur Fellowship. I am writing a new biography. The task seems overwhelming (every line she wrote is publishable, and she wrote hundreds of thousands of lines)—but I do believe that when the Lord assigns a job, He furnishes everything needed to accomplish it. Pray that I may be where He wants me to be to receive it.

Questions and Answers

From a California seminar:

"What are the three or four books which have had the greatest impact on your life besides the Bible?"

Four very important books (I can't be sure they're the most important) are:

Amy Carmichael, *Toward Jerusalem*
George MacDonald, *Salted with Fire*
C.S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*
Romano Guardini, *The Lord*

"Please explain exactly how you 'commit' a person or a situation to God. Is it saying the words and choosing to believe against all odds that He will do it? e.g. an adult child's salvation, a young adult on drugs, a homosexual nephew."

This question implies that when a person has been "committed," God will do exactly what the one who prays hopes for, viz. save the child, cure the drug habit or the homosexuality. To me, commitment means handing a person or situation completely over to God: "Here, Lord. I give this to You, trusting You to do exactly what You want to do. I'm sure that will be the best thing." We are commanded to make our requests known to God (Phil 4:6). This means we pray about things we would like to see done or changed, but the trusting soul knows his requests may be "impossible" (see Mt 26:39, 42), so he leaves them

peacefully with God. God has given us freedom to choose. He will not retract that gift. The one prayed for may still refuse His offer of grace, as did many in Jesus' days on earth. Yet we are encouraged to be importunate in prayer. We must trust the Spirit of God to lead us—to continue praying, or, in some cases, to stop (1 Jn 4:16-17).

Travel Schedule

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January 9-13 Katoomba, Australia, Church Missionary Society

January 14-19 Canberra, Australia, Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students

January 27-30 Melbourne, Australia, Church Missionary Society

February 2-5 Bangalore, India, Indian Evangelical Mission

February 6-15 Donhavur Fellowship, South India

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