

Wings

*"Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles."
Isaiah 40:31*



September 11, 2011

Why Does God Allow Suffering?

On the tenth anniversary of the most horrific event of our generation, we still struggle with this question. But Moses provided an explanation over 3,000 years ago.

"And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut. 8:3).

One of the great questions that perplexes the human race is the existence of suffering. It would be easy to explain suffering if it correlated precisely with human behavior; that is, only bad people suffer, and good people do not. But life demonstrates again and again the folly of that explanation. Events like 9/11 make such a mockery of justice that some use the existence of suffering as an argument against the existence of God. Surely, no all-powerful God would allow His creation to suffer so cruelly. So we struggle to come up with some other answer.

The words in our text, spoken by Moses to the generation of Israelites that entered the Promised Land, provide at least a starting place for dealing with the problem of suffering. These people to whom Moses was speaking knew a thing or two about suffering. They had grown up in the wilderness, living on meager rations and subjected to all the privations of a nomad's life. One could argue that Israel's sin had earned them this life of hardship; but remember that it was their parents and grandparents who had rejected God at Kadesh-Barnea. This generation was innocent; they suffered unfairly, for someone else's sin.

Moses explained that their suffering served a two-fold purpose: "to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not." First, their suffering *humbled* them, stripping them of pride and self-importance, forcing them to depend on God for guidance. Second, it *tested* them, exposing their character for what it really was. The fires of pain burned away the pretensions and false fronts with which people usually hide

their true selves. Their parents had failed the test; this generation passed it.

Later in this chapter, Moses carried the idea further, explaining that their trials had a more far-reaching purpose: "that He might humble you and that He might test you, *to do you good in the end*" (v. 16). Their life of hardship in the wilderness prepared them for the task of taking their final home in Canaan. As painful as it was, their suffering made them better, stronger people.

Before we accuse God of being capricious in allowing suffering in our lives, we need to stop and think of the alternative. What kind of people would we be if God coddled and pampered us? We would be spoiled brats, concerned only with our own petty interests, incapable of dealing with even the most trivial challenges of life. Is that really what we want?

There is much about the problem of suffering that we will never understand. But we cannot escape the fact that, life being what it is, we *need* suffering. It is "the discipline of the Lord" (Heb. 12:3-11), by which we learn how to grow up.

– David King