

Ali CRIPPS (GB)

31/08/2013

Facing up to illness and disability **A time to recognise our dependence on God**

Psalm 27 v. 1-6, 13-14 (brief exegesis)

In Psalm 27 we have immediate recognition, and affirmation, by the Psalmist of the sovereignty, lordship and salvation of God, alongside acknowledgement of the anchor and security that God is for him. Jesus himself, when asked by his disciples how they should pray, used exactly the pattern (in what we know as the Lord's Prayer) that we see in Psalm 27 – praise to God our Father, affirmation of His place above all others and expressing confidence in Almighty God, before launching into supplication – requests for God's provision, protection, forgiveness and presence. Taking the whole of Psalm 27, David does not just express his confidence in God, but he grows it, cultivates it, and reminds himself of just in whom it is that he has his confidence, on whom it is that he can so fully depend. The Psalm uses a variety of synonyms for adverse situations one can find oneself in – and then affirms the fact of God's presence in those situations. Learning to trust God, to depend on God, in one set of circumstances leads to confidence in other situations both for the psalmist and for us. Verse 4 speaks of the longing for the intimate and felt presence of God, and then through to verse 6, we read of the 'shelter' (of God's sanctuary), the 'house of the Lord', 'temple', 'tent' and 'sacrifices' all referring to places for worship of the Living God; the psalmist viewing unhindered access to God's presence in worship as the best of all gifts – *this* is the place of both true delight and true safety. Then at the end of this psalm, in verses 13 and 14, David urges us to 'wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage', in other words, to actively maintain our dependence on our utterly dependable God.

Compromising our independence?

As Christians, we all recognise on one level our dependence on God; the moment we confess our faith in Jesus as our Lord we are indeed saved (Rom 10 v 9). But that Lordship of Christ over our lives we can be inclined to take lightly, and we can resist it. What kind of God do we worship? As C S Lewis put it, 'we want not so much a father in heaven as a grandfather in heaven', in other words someone we can run to

if life takes a turn for the worse and who will pat us on the head, smile benevolently, and make it all better. But God longs for us to be dependent on Him *totally*, in all things and in every area of our lives, submitting ourselves daily to Him, being willing to live our lives as a daily offering, 'continually offer[ing] up a sacrifice of praise to God' (Hebrews 13 v. 15), in daily submission to the God whom we know 'works all things together for the good of those who love him and who have been called according to his purpose' (Rom. 8 v. 28).

Now, it is one thing to say (or write) the previous paragraph but it is quite another thing to live it and believe it to the core of our being, especially when our lives take a difficult path such as in illness or disability. We can *say* we belong to God, but our innate (sinful) rebellion against God fights this; we don't want to submit to pain, physical or mental, nor do we want our independence compromised by illness or disability. In Western society we value independence so highly that to admit our need of others is perceived as an admission of weakness and even failure. Yet to admit our dependence on God is what all of us need to do, on a daily basis.

Like a little child ?

But look at one picture Jesus gives us in each of the synoptic Gospels (Luke 18 v 15-17; Mark 10 v 13-16; Matthew 19 v 13-15). People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them – bless them – and the disciples rebuked the parents for doing this. But Jesus response : 'Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them – for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it' (Luke 18 v 16&17). And he took the children in his arms (wonderfully demonstrating total blessing, total acceptance), put his hand on them and blessed them (Mark 10 v. 13-16).

To receive the Kingdom of God 'like a little child' is challenging: Jesus is not asking us to become like a child in immature thought or behaviour – what He is focussing on is the total dependence that children have on those who care for them. To use one of Paul's favourite expressions – *how much more then* should we acknowledge our dependence on our Heavenly Father. Facing illness and disability causes us to face our dependence (or lack of it) on God.

God in all circumstances

Job is the book that instantly springs to mind – Job wrestling with his suffering. But remember that Job's agonising is that of the believer, not the sceptic, and he does eventually completely submit to what God is doing, passing through self-pity and self-assertion, finally to self-surrender to God's purposes (Stott). God's words, after 38 chapters of misguided attempts from Job's 'friends' to justify his suffering, hit Job with devastating power, prompting an overwhelmed, repentant surrender to God. God speaks not to justify His actions, but to assert His Lordship over the foundation of the earth, the whole of creation, earth, sea and sky. Total Lordship – He is *God*.

The God of Job chapters 38 – 41 is the same God to whom we have submitted in faith and on whom we can and must depend. Yes, our faith includes the supernatural and I don't believe we should deny that, but it also includes daily dependent trust *in spite of* results. We need the sure faith that can say, as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did in Daniel 3 v. 18 when faced with another kind of extreme situation, confessing their unshakeable trust in God – '...but even if not...'. Even if Daniel's three friends were not saved from the furnace 'heated seven times hotter than usual', they were not going to waver from their trust and dependence on God alone.

Dr Paul Brand, when working with leprosy patients in India, was asked by journalist Philip Yancey about his experiences of seeing Christians go through great suffering, whether the pain had turned people towards God or away from God. After thinking he '...concluded that there was no common response. Some drew closer to God, some drifted bitterly away. The main difference was their focus of attention, obsessing with questions about cause – Why me ? What did I do to deserve this ? Am I being punished ? These people often turned away from God. Our need to ask the question "Why ?" shows our need to be independent, to try to find a solution ourselves. True dependence on God leaves the "Why?" to Him, in faith and trust. In contrast, the triumphant sufferers took individual responsibility for their own responses and trusted God despite the discomfort'. It is interesting to reflect for a moment on the Israelites of the Exodus being sustained by God in the wilderness. The Lord provided manna, which literally means 'What is it ?' for their physical needs: the question was the answer with God providing and sustaining His people, growing their faith and dependence on Him.

The initiator of this conference, Dr Paul Tournier, in his writings considering the 'whole person' says that 'only rarely are we the masters of events but [along with those who help us] we are responsible for our actions...suffering is never beneficial in itself, and must always be fought against, but what counts is the way a person reacts to suffering: what is [our] personal reaction to suffering going to be ? A positive, active, creative reaction which will develop his person, or a negative one that will stunt it ?' Tournier makes the important point that suffering is not the *cause* of personal growth, but an occasion for it. He used the analogy of a nutcracker: unforeseen calamities (such as illness and/or disability) apply force that can break through the hard outer shell of personal security. The act of breaking will cause pain, of course, but it need not destroy. On the contrary, given the right environment this can lead to creative growth. Old habits and patterns of behaviour may not work or suffice, but in our vulnerable state, new ones can be formed, and in particular, a new – or renewed – dependence on God.

Joni Eareckson Tada, after a diving accident that left her quadriplegic, wrote: 'Maybe God's gift to me is dependence. I will never reach a place of self-sufficiency that crowds God out. I am aware of His grace every moment. My need for help is obvious every day when I wake up, waiting for someone to come and dress me.' Joni touches here on not only what she beautifully describes as the 'gift' of dependence, but also her necessary dependence on others who care for her. She has experienced the limitless strength that God gives when we do utterly depend on Him, and allow those who care for us to be part of the gift.

God's grace is sufficient

Facing illness or the prospect of disability challenges our security in things and circumstances and we learn, or can be forced to learn, the immense value of dependence, and of inter-dependence, and thereby experience grace. In his letters to the church in Corinth, Paul talks about his 'thorn in the flesh', and I'm sure it's providential that we are not told exactly what this is, but Paul obviously struggled – he pleaded for healing three times, and three times was denied. Finally he knows from the Lord – 'My grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Corinthians 12 v. 9). This is a staggering statement, but one that Christians can so readily and flippantly quote. When we really consider – prayerfully consider – this, it is an invitation for us to set aside our self-sufficiency, our self-reliance, our valued independence, and to admit our weakness, to actively set aside our sins (*yes, sins*) of pride and arrogance, and acknowledge that in our weakness we can fully rely on God, fully depend on God.

When facing illness or disability we, as Christians, face choices. We can recoil in anger and despair against God, or, we accept the trial before us as an opportunity for learning, being refined and moulded by the Potter. I don't think God loves one kind of sufferer more than the other or that one is more 'spiritual' than the other. God certainly understands those who scream and struggle as well as those who learn that suffering can be a means of grace and transformation. David and Job both fell into both categories, but God, I think, wants us to look beyond the 'why ?' and ask instead 'to what end ?', to move from cause to response – and this for *our* sakes, not His. Would it actually help us to know why ? Would it have helped Job? What does help us when facing suffering of any kind is to turn to God in trust, in faith, in total dependence, allowing our self-sufficiency and self-reliance to be broken down and an entirely new level of faith to be created, so transforming suffering into grace. Then we can join with the psalmist and know that the Lord is indeed our light and salvation, the stronghold of our lives, and we have nothing to fear (Psalm 27 v. 1&2).

Bibliography

- E.S.P. Heaveror, Commentary on Job, IVP (1980)
- C.S. Lewis, 'The Problem of Pain', Collins (1945)
- J.A.Motyer, Commentary on Psalms, IVP (1980)
- John Stott, 'The Cross of Christ', IVP (2011)
- Joni Eareckson Tada, 'A Place of Healing', David Cook (2010)
- Paul Tournier, 'Creative Suffering', SCM Press (1982)
- Paul Tournier, 'The Meaning of Persons', SCM Press (1967)
- Philip Yancey, 'Where is God when it hurts?' Zondervan (1997)