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One Universal Answer

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Perhaps one of the greatest, if not *the* greatest, of the difficulties of the Christian is to accept in a practical way, and establish as a governing rule of life, the things "most surely believed" as truth. We are all greatly oppressed with some of the big problems and questions which are related to Christian life and experience, either subjectively or objectively; and yet, the most difficult thing is to accept the true answer or solution when it is offered.

This difficulty is largely due to the fact that, before a change in the situation in question can be effected, there has to be a change in our attitude toward it. We want *things* changed. God wants us changed. But even here, it is not just a psychological change. That might be very artificial and self-deceptive. The question is: Is there one answer to most, if not all, of our problems? Is there just one thing which, if we embraced it, would be God's answer to, and explanation of, our difficulties? Has God one answer to most of our cries of 'Why?'

The Problem of Suffering

Take the problem of suffering. That may include many things; physical, circumstantial, spiritual. It may relate to ourselves or to others. Almost countless are the ways of God's dealings with us, which are most trying and hard to bear. The most acute form of suffering is that which relates to God Himself: His silence; hiding Himself; seeming to have neither knowledge nor care. Prayers seem to be unheard, and are, apparently (we would say positively) unanswered.

What is the explanation? Well, the Word of God has made very clear that such an explanation exists.

There is one all-comprehending, all-embracing, all-governing purpose to which God has committed Himself, by creation, by redemption, and by union. That purpose is the conformity of a race to the image of His Son. This is man's chief end and chief good. What more satisfied and 'happy' person is there – even amidst suffering and sorrow – than he or she who is most perfect in patience, love, faith, and the other 'fruits of the Spirit'? If our requests regarding *things* were granted, while we were left the same people, unchanged in disposition and nature, it would not be long before we should be in the same unhappy condition over other things. There is possible for us some inherent quality that wears out circumstances and reigns above them. Some of the most radiant people have been the greatest sufferers in infirmity, poverty, or other forms of adversity; whilst the most 'privileged' are often the most discontented.

The solution to the problem of suffering does not lie in being philosophical; it is not in fatalistic resignation – 'This is my lot; I suppose I must accept it'. It is not in passive or active suppression of desire. It is far removed from self-pity, bitterness, cynicism, or envy, and the rest of their wretched family of wilderness-makers and wanderers.

We may have to let go the particular occasion of our trouble, and first recognise, and then embrace with our heart, the fact that in the affliction there resides the immense eternal potentiality of an increase of the image of God's Son, which is to be the one and the only character and nature of the eternal kingdom. We have too much visualised the 'Heaven' that is to be, as geographical and pleasurable, without giving sufficient weight to the fact of a *nature* to be inculcated and perfected.

The Work of God

Why is it that – God willing and purposing a certain object to be accomplished, eg the salvation of souls, the building of the Church, the increase of spiritual measure; and God being Who and What He is, All-mighty, All-wise, All-gracious – the work is fraught with so many problems? The workers are often at the end of themselves; everything is so hard and heartbreaking; and in deepest suffering many die with so little accomplished. Why is the vindication of those who have honestly sought to do the will of God and have suffered deeply at the hands of men, even Christian men, so long delayed?

How much we could enlarge upon the perplexities of the work of the Lord! But if we could say all, does not the same solution apply as above?

It has become almost a platitude now to say that 'God is more concerned for the worker than for the work'. Yes, and, as a proposition, we may quite honestly believe it; but as applied and experienced it is the root of unspeakably much perplexity and disappointment. Yet there it is: the whole fact that, second causes being admitted or rejected, the work of God has never been something easy or straightforward, with the continuous manifestation of His absolute All-mightiness making difficulties as though they were nothing.

God will never put work or service in the place of character; and, if we do that, eternity will reveal that, however *much* we may have done, we are very small amongst the inhabitants of the Land, whose stature will be measured by 'the measure of Christ'. It would be well if all who contemplate or are engaged in the work of God were governed by this one absolutely final law: that, both as to themselves and as to those amongst whom they minister, the ultimate test is – not how much work

is done, but how much of Christ is present, or results from the ministry. This might solve many problems, explain many 'strange' ways of God, and seal life with the kind of 'success' that is worthy of the name in the eyes of Heaven.

The Church's Unity

We touch on one other problem, though it is too big for any adequate handling here: the problem of the Church's unity or disunity.

What a problem and heartbreak this is! What efforts are being made to solve it! Never was it engaging so much attention as now. We are not unfamiliar with this matter from the standpoint of Church History, the Ecumenical movement, World Councils, Conferences, and so on; and we sincerely trust that we shall not be thought to consider ourselves superior when we say with emphasis that we believe that there is one answer and only one.

It is God's answer, anticipating all divisions and established before them. That answer is a right apprehension of Christ, and conformity to Him. Every Christian believes in 'the oneness of the Body of Christ'. Books, almost without number, have been written on the Church. But we are really no nearer a manifest expression of the Church, as set forth in the letters of Paul to the Ephesians and Colossians, because the real secret is in the measure of Christ in all concerned. No *two* members of Christ can keep apart, if Christ is really dominantly Lord in their hearts by the Holy Spirit! We may have put systems, institutions, denominations, traditions, interpretations of doctrine, etc, before Christ Himself. It may be necessary to dethrone and displace these, and make everything of Christ, before there will be any solution of the problem.

There are other questions and difficulties, but the same answer applies to all. God's end – to which, in a thousand ways, He works – is that "Christ may be all and in all", and light is thrown upon all the dark things by this.