

Footstep #41 Suffering Leads to Empowerment!

Perhaps the most difficult experience for the Christian is the pain and anxiety that comes with suffering. Suffering, troubles, hardships, calamities, misfortune, etc. are all powerful and their hurt puts our faith to the test. Dr. Kolb states it concisely and clearly: “But God has the last laugh, Luther says, citing Psalm 2:4. (*The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.*) He ‘allows these things to take place to exercise our faith so that we may learn to depend on his Word alone and not have to look for visible signs, perceptible to the senses. Instead we rely on that which cannot be seen,’ and this is the consolation of the faithful children of God.” (Robert Kolb. *Luther and the Stories of God*. p. 102.)

The Old Testament story of Jonah and the great fish is practically known by everyone. However, instead of focusing on the great fish, both Luther and Calvin in their 16th century sermons focused on Jonah’s sin of questioning God, refusing to make the voyage to Nineveh to preach repentance, and for being angry at God when Israel’s enemies were victorious. Clearly, Jonah separated himself from God. The story continues with a great storm and the sailors blaming Jonah for the hurricane force winds. *The experience of panic, suffering, and the fear of death led Jonah to confess his sin. “Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”* (Jonah 1:12)

John Calvin’s sermon emphasized the awfulness of Jonah’s sin against the dignity of a sovereign God and Martin Luther’s sermon emphasized a pastoral perspective, exalting divine grace, stressing that no sin is unforgivable, and moving from the negative of Jonah’s rebellion to the positive application of God’s forgiving grace. Luther in his sermon repeatedly spoke about how God ignited Jonah’s faith. (Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God*. p. 102) Jonah was dead in his own sin and as a result of his terrifying experience, he confesses to God and is saved.

But the biblical story continues with the 120,000 people of Nineveh putting on sackcloth and being spared by God. Jonah continues to voice his anger against God – even after his life was saved. In fact, he repeatedly rejects God’s love. Luther tells his followers that God is still God and God is love.

This is how suffering leads to empowerment. It is a revolutionary revelation of God’s consistent love for his people who are faithful and every day ask God to be part of their lives. Perhaps if Martin Luther was preaching in the 21st century, he sermon message would be “Loyalty pays off!”



John Calvin – Reformed Church