

There is a man I've known for many years whom I've always admired, and to be honest, have at times envied. He had wonderful parents and married well himself. He is bright and prosperous, has nice children who are successful in their own right, and enjoys a good reputation. Now I have a very good life, and I have been incredibly blessed, but whenever I'm around him, I catch myself feeling envious. It didn't help, when I saw him last month. We were talking about the stock market decline and he told me he'd had a gut feeling about it, so had pulled all his money out of the market when the Dow Jones was at 14,000. Now I'm not only jealous of him, I don't like him, either.

We have a mutual friend who I saw this past week, and he told me the man was suffering from depression. My first thought was, "From what?" But we never know the secret pain others carry. People who appear to our eyes to be wildly and abundantly blessed, can harbor an inward pain we know nothing about.

Did you hear this week about Adolf Merckle, the German entrepreneur worth over nine billion dollars who, unable to cope with his business losses, threw himself in front of a train? If we had met him six months ago, we would have thought he hadn't a worry in the world.

We've been thinking about some basic theological principles. Who is God? Who is Jesus? Who are we? What is the church and what is its purpose? What is sin? Why does evil exist? Today, I want to talk about why people suffer. I want to begin by saying I have never met anyone, not a single person, who doesn't suffer. I have met people who have perfected the illusion of ease and comfort, the impression of unflappability, but as I have gotten to know them, I have discovered they, like everyone else, suffer and grieve and worry.

My Grandmother Gulley lived in London, England for a good portion of her adult years. When she moved back to America she brought with her a beautiful collection of cups and saucers which she displayed on a shelf. They were very delicate and I was forbidden from touching them, for fear I might break them. But I would stare up at them, my hands behind my back. I marveled that anything so delicate and perfect could be made by human hands. In June of 1989, my Grandmother Gulley passed away and we went to her house. I made a beeline for those cups and saucers. I didn't want them. I just wanted to hold them without my grandmother having a coronary. Funny thing. All those cups and saucers, which in my youth I believed were perfect, had cracks and chips. Every one of them. If you stood back far enough, you couldn't see them, but when you got close, there they were.

Everyone suffers. Everyone has cracks and chips in their lives. Standing at a distance, we might not see them. But when we get close, when we get to know them, we can see brokenness and pain and sorrow we hadn't noticed before. Everyone suffers.

Indeed, suffering is such a universal human experience, that anthropologists believe religion started as an effort to understand and explain human suffering. We only have to read three short chapters in the book of Genesis before we find the author explaining why childbirth is so painful, why making a living is so difficult, and human relationships so complicated. Unfortunately, the author's explanation for suffering wasn't very profound—he believed all suffering had its origins in an angry God who had been disobeyed.

The most famous effort to explain suffering is the book of Job. It begins with God and Satan wagering whether Job's faith can be broken were he to know sufficient loss and grief. God says to Satan, in effect, "Try to break him, I dare you." Job's children, home, and wealth are obliterated. Job's life is devastated, but when he questions God, he gets scolded. In the end, he has more children, which is supposed to make everything alright, but children aren't cars that we forget once we get a new one. Til the day he died, Job mourned his dead children. I've often thought the book of Job was incomplete.

Theologians talk about the “mystery of suffering,” but I’m not sure why. There are true mysteries in life, but suffering isn’t one of them. What makes suffering seem mysterious is our surprise when it happens to us. “Why me?” I don’t remember the moment I was born, but I’m fairly certain there wasn’t an angel there giving me a “Get Out of Suffering Free” card. I always thought we did our children a disservice when we taught them life should be fair. That creates an expectation that can never be met. Insofar as it depends upon us, we should treat people with fairness. But we should never forget that life isn’t fair.

I’m not trying to be hard-hearted, but complaining that life dealt us a bad hand is a monumental waste of time. Here’s why: life is so random and so subject to change, it is entirely possible, indeed likely, that periods of difficulty will be followed by periods of beauty and joy. When I read about Adolf Merckle killing himself, I felt sad for him. Then I thought of all the sick people who struggle valiantly to live and I became angered by his selfishness and shortsightedness, by his final declaration that life would never be better, that he wouldn’t know any future joys, that his work and mission were done, his worth and value depleted, simply because he’d lost two billion of his nine billion dollars. Had anyone never told him about the valleys of life, about the inevitability of suffering? How do you live 74 years and not learn that?

Let me just say that I am well-qualified to pose these questions. I am an absolute expert when it comes to complaining about misfortune and hard luck. I am without peer. I have stretched head colds into terminal illnesses, and hundred dollar car repairs into bankruptcy. But all my complaining and *Why me's?* have never changed a thing. We do ourselves a huge disservice when we believe we are exempt from suffering.

Don't teach your children life should be fair. Then they will expect it to be so. Instead, teach them how to respond when life isn't fair. Teach them to rise to the occasion. Teach them to work for justice. Teach them to have good humor and confidence and faith. Teach them to be brave. But don't teach them life will be fair, and don't exhaust yourself treating them with exact, balanced-scales fairness, for you will be establishing an expectation of fairness in their minds that the world can not and will not meet.

Twelve years ago, I had, what I suspect now was a nervous breakdown. My first book had just come out and had done very well. But the demands on my time were incredible, my children were little, and I wasn't sufficiently mature to deal with the vast and sudden changes in my life. What should have been a time of celebration became a time of great anxiety.

Years before, I had been given a book, *The Road Less Traveled*, by the psychologist M. Scott Peck. I hadn't read it, but in desperation picked it up late one night when I couldn't sleep and read the opening words, "Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters."

I read those lines, and the feeling that I had been uniquely visited with difficulty and hardship in a way no one else ever had, went away. I read that paragraph over and over, then I went to sleep. Slept ten hours. Woke up a new person. When people talk about being born again, I know exactly what they mean. To this day, when I start to feel life is unfair and unbearable, I read those words. Life is difficult...

Jesus knew this. In the gospel of John, Jesus is talking with his disciples. He knows the days ahead will be hard ones. He reassures them with these words, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart and have courage; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

The Christian life is a not a ticket out of trouble. It is an invitation to hope and to trust the last word will be a good one.