

Real Life Issues 1: What if I am not healed?

Preamble

Over the next few weeks Roger and I are looking at real life issues

- Our faith is not just a Sunday hobby but should affect every part of our life
- Inevitably we are shaped by our background and society we live in
- Yet God calls us to become part of his kingdom
- This implies a new culture
- A new set of values and beliefs
- Based not on us but on Him and His reality

We want these sessions to be real and will be more than happy to pray with anyone after the service

- However we won't make calls to the front
- Because some of these issues may be embarrassing and sensitive.
- We are hoping to have time for some comment, question and discussion at the end of each session though.
- And just ask people to be understanding and kind in any comments

Introduction

Today's Issue is healing

- We believe God can and does heal
- We thank him for the times that we have seen him answer our prayers
- But we must also acknowledge there are times when he chooses not to.
- And that can be difficult
- Hard to understand and hard to explain.

One of the main challenges to faith that we hear is the question

- How can a good God allow suffering?
- And we can discuss the idea of sin and brokenness spoiling God's world
- And the theological arguments for God.
- And the proof of his love that we can find in creation.
- However, I don't want to do that this morning
- Because we are not talking about academic issues but real issues.

And the real issue I want to think about is not what we think but how we feel.

- However good my theological argument
- It won't necessarily meet us where it hurts.
- Now a Cognitive Behavioural Psychologist would probably disagree with me there
- Because it is true that our feelings are often based on our perceptions
- And if our perceptions are changed then our feelings and ultimately our actions will follow.
- And that is the basic principle behind their ability to treat people through their psychological and emotional problems.

And actually I agree with them

- That is the whole point of faith in Jesus
- Our beliefs are changed as we grow in our faith in Jesus
- And that effects how we think and behave.
- And that is inevitably where we will end up.
- But I want to start where we feel
- I want to start by talking about hurt and shame

Hurt and Shame.

Very often that is how we feel when there is something in our life that just won't go away

- A chronic and debilitating illness,
- Psychological problems or mental illness.
- Maybe some spiritual failure
- Or family issue.

Our friends have been kind and supportive

- They have prayed and loved us
- But deep down we feel a failure
- A bad Christian
- We see them struggle with their unanswered prayers for us
- And feel we are a discouragement to them.

I read an article this week in Youth Work Magazine by a lady called Rachel Newham

- She suffered from mental illness in the form of severe anxiety attacks
- She says
“When I was at my most unwell, having panic attacks on buses and unable to trust in any kind of future, I felt an overpowering sense of shame. I could not lift my head in worship times and believed myself bad for the kingdom of God (after all its hard to share the good news when you're crying all the time). I didn't feel able to participate in communion and could barely pray”

Whatever our experiences I would suggest all of us have felt that sense of failure and shame at some time

- If not then I would suggest you will at some point in your life.
- The question we keep coming back to is
- “How can I be a good Christian if I'm such a failure?”
- “What kind of witness is that?”
- Or variations on that theme.

Sometimes we have wonderful experiences of God

- And feel on a spiritual high
- But there is still that niggle at the back of our mind
- The area of life and or health we cannot overcome.

We are not alone!

The first encouragement I want to bring is this

- You are not alone
- We are none of us alone in this.

As we look back through the history of the church we know of many great and wonderful Christians

- Whom God used in great ways
- Martin Luther suffered from periods of clinical depression and illness
- John Calvin suffered from persistent migraines and asthma
- Charles Spurgeon the great Baptist preacher suffered from feelings of isolation depression and rheumatic gout.
- William Wilberforce had digestive problems
 - Possibly something like Crone's
 - It was so bad he ended up addicted to laudanum pain killers
- Mother Theresa suffered for most of her life with a lack of any sense of the presence of God
 - She knew he'd called her to the work in Calcutta
 - But felt abandoned by him once she was there.

My final example is the Apostle Paul

- A powerful conversion experience
- A great ministry
- Wonderful experience of God
- Yet he still had what he called a 'Thorn in his Flesh'

Read 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

"I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³ And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— ⁴ was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, ⁷ or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

The Thorn in the Flesh.

This is a really important passage for this topic

- Paul is talking about wonderful experiences of God
- Yet there is something keeping him humble
- A nagging, irritating, debilitating, painful experience
- That just won't go away.

What was his thorn – no one knows

- That's kind of the point
- It means we can apply to our own situation
- It may have been health related
- Some have speculated that he was referring to his bad and failing eyesight.
- It may have been a mental illness, depression or anxiety of some form.
- Or a habitual sin he kept falling back into
- I have even heard it suggested he was referring to his wife!
- The idea was that as a Pharisee he would almost certainly have been married
- Yet his wife is never mentioned
- So this person speculated that she was not a Christian
- That Paul who led so many to Christ was unable to bring salvation to his own wife.

I don't know.

- But I do know all of these issues could and do qualify as a thorn in the flesh.
- And they are all issues we can pray for time and again
- Yet never seem to overcome.
- And the question we keep asking is, why?
- Why can't we overcome and be free.
- I think in this passage Paul offers three reasons

Why?

1. Paul says this is a messenger of Satan to torment me

- First of all this is an affliction
- It is not something wrong with us.
- But a trial we face
- C. S. Lewis wrote in his 'Letters to Malcolm'
- About mental illness
"Some people feel guilty about their anxieties and regard them as a defect of faith. I don't agree at all. They are afflictions, not sins. Like all afflictions, they are, if we can so take them, our share in the passion of Christ"

Let's think about that for a moment

- He is saying rather than a sign of failure
- These issues are a sign of us sharing in Christ's sufferings
- A sign of us being just like Jesus.

2. It keeps him Humble

- Helps him see God's success rather than his own
- Please don't think that in anyway suggests we suffer because we are proud
- And if we only learnt our lesson and became humble
- Then it would all go away.
- That really is not what he is saying here at all
- It is again part of becoming like Jesus

In his letter to the Philippians Paul reminds us to have the same mind-set as Jesus
⁶ *Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;* ⁷ *rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.* ⁸ *And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!*
⁹ *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,* ¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,* ¹¹ *and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:6-11)*

Jesus' greatest triumph was the point of greatest failure

- Death on the brutal and humiliating Cross.
- In man's universe we see failure and humiliation
- But God sees triumph and success
- Is that not also true of us.
- What we see as failure and poor witness God sees as a triumph of faithfulness.

In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus turns the world's values upside down

- *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* (Matt 5:3)
- So many of the beatitudes are failures turned to triumphs
- As an interesting exercise we can translate Blessed as successful
- It's not that remote from the meaning of the blessed

Matt 5:1-12

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² *and he began to teach them. He said:*

³ *"Successful are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

⁴ *Successful are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

⁵ *Successful are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

⁶ *Successful are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

⁷ *Successful are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*

⁸ *Successful are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

⁹ *Successful are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

¹⁰ *Successful are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

¹¹ *“Successful are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

3. Helps him rely on God

Finally Paul concedes his thorn helps him to rely on God

- Because when we are seen to be helpless
- Then the power of God can be seen
- Not by solving our problems but by enabling us to see past us to God.
- We don't want people to follow us because we're wonderful
- Well we shouldn't want that
- We should want people to follow Jesus because we're nothing.
- And He is everything

That really is our witness

- Not that we've overcome
- But that we Trust in Him
- In the Bible trust and believe mean the same thing
- So when it says believe in Jesus
- It means we should trust him

That is our witness

- Not that we succeed but that we trust him

Conclusion

How do we respond?

- In her article about her anxiety Rachel Newman said the passages she read or heard did not enable her to feel God
- But did allow her to be honest
- And enabled her to think differently about her illness.

The verses that we beat ourselves up with

- Like rejoice always, don't be anxious, the prayer of the faithful man achieves much
- And so on
- These are not intended to be burdens
- Maybe, they are there as a way of helping us to change our perceptions
- Understand ourselves and God better and see things differently

Occasionally in this world something happens that helps us see things more clearly

- And we are moved and blessed by the experience
- One such moment was in the Olympic Games in Barcelona in 1992

- British runner Derek Redmond was running in the semi-final of the 400m
- Halfway round the track his hamstring snapped and he stumbled to the ground
- Where he remained for a few moments.
- His race was over
- All the years of effort and commitment vanished in pain and failure.

But then something happened

- Someone came and helped him to his feet
- But rather than be led to the medical area he pulled away and began to hobble along the track towards the finishing line
- An official tried to guide him off but he struggled on.
- Then a man ran from the crowd
- Put his arms around him and helped him on
- It was his father

Shooing away those who tried to stop them they limped on

- Derek's sobbing with pain and loss
- Till they reached the finishing line to a standing ovation.
- A truly moving moment
- If you google the race now you will find it much harder to find who won
- But there are dozens of images of Derek's failure

To me this is what it's like with God

- We limp on hanging on to our father
- Till we reach the finish line
- And the world knows that he is God and he loves us.

Amen