

In recent years, something has arisen in the modern church known as the prosperity gospel. It teaches that God wants us to be healthy and wealthy, and so we have to do are name it and claim it, and give generously to the church to secure a bright and easy future. The more money you have, clearly, the more God loves you. This movement is ridiculously popular, and it has crept into daily life for a lot of Christians.

The opposite has always been a criticism of Christianity, anyway. The wicked are like chaff and blown away, so, people ask, how come Christians suffer at times? How could such a God exist, one who is loving and yet allows for God's children to suffer?

And if a Christian is not healthy and wealthy, does that mean they aren't a good enough Christian?

I am personally quite against the prosperity gospel. Jesus never promises us wealth, and certainly not health. In fact, he promises us trials and persecution. Moreover, I've known far too many people who have had a crisis of faith when good times failed to materialize, or when bad things happen, and these could not be reconciled to the prosperity gospel they'd been taught. I'm not denying that some people have met Jesus through the prosperity gospel, for God can use anything God wants to reach God's children, but I don't think God is a vending machine, or a genie, or cruel enough to always give us our way. I don't think wealth is a sign of great faith, and I don't think disease seeks out the unbelievers. I think we live in a fallen world, we all suffer in our own ways, and that good and bad things fall to the believers and the non-believers alike.

But here in the very first psalm, the writer says the righteous are like trees planted by streams of water, that bear fruit and do not wither. At first, that might sound a bit like a Joel Osteen sermon. Follow God and good things will follow you. You'll produce lots of fruit and you'll never wither, and you'll spend your days in a peach location by a stream. Sounds like a pretty good deal for a tree or a person. But the psalms are not so naive as that when taken together. Sure, there are songs of great joy and triumph, but the psalms also speak of terrible, nearly unimaginable suffering, of broken hearts and souls in deep despair. How then, are we to understand ourselves as trees planted by stream, rooted in God?

The thing about trees is they aren't static. They bend in the wind, and sometimes they even break a few branches, but they carry on. Strong winds actually cause trees to send their roots even deeper, to anchor themselves more solidly in the earth or else be uprooted. They withstand the storms of life because of their deep anchors, deep roots, within the soil.

I don't care how good you are, how often you read the Bible, whether you're a monk or nun or the worst offender among us. You will face suffering. You will face storms, just like everyone else. The difference between the Christian and the nonbeliever is not the suffering or storms that come, it is our roots. God promises to never leave us or forsake us, God can sympathize in every way with us, God is the anchor, the roots to which we cling when everything is wrong. The nonbeliever faces such challenges alone, in a way that we as Christians never will. This is the true gospel; not that you will suffer less, but that you will never suffer alone. That is the good news we have to share. God will be with us, as will all the saints and our brothers and sisters in Christ. And no matter what happens here in this life, we can be confident of the life to come, and that all will be well.

In this life, however, God will never leave us and can understand our suffering. Perhaps you've faced the betrayal of a partner. God knows that pain. God has been partner to a wayward people who chose evil ways and false gods instead. God walks with you in that pain and understands, from one broken heart to another.

Perhaps you've lost a loved one, a child even. God knows that pain. God watched God's son be tortured and murdered on a cross. God walks with you in that pain. You will not be uprooted.

Perhaps you are physically suffering, perhaps you are facing your own death. God knows that pain too. Jesus experienced death, and God watches God's children experience disease and death, knowing it was never meant to be this way. God walks with you in that pain. God will anchor you.

Whatever suffering weighs heavy on your heart, God walks with you, God knows your pain, and God will never let you be uprooted. That is not to say

that bad things will not happen to you. They will. But you will not face them alone.

Trusting in God's faithfulness does not mean that the storms will never come, it does not mean we will never suffer or ache. It does mean, however, that evil will never have the last word, that we will never walk alone, and that even the worst parts of our lives can be used for good until the day that God will make all things right. It means we need not fear, because we can trust that God is ever at work for our greatest good and God's glory. This is the true gospel, hear and believe, and teach this gospel to all who need to be saved.

Rev. Kate Mauch
May 12, 2024