
Everybody's Got The Blues

Isaiah 55:1-9, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9

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In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul warns the Corinthian Church against a false sense of security. He reminds them that like the Israelites during the Exodus, they can be baptized, eat spiritual food, drink spiritual drink, and still be prone to temptations and idolatry. The temptation of greed, the sin of complaining, or the refusal to submit to God's lordship in daily living. But Paul does not stop at warning against temptation, he also offers a strange encouragement: "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man". In modern parlance, this might be more familiar to us as "Everybody's got the blues". After all, at one time or another, we have all had the common flu, encountered friendship problems, and worried about a life-changing decision. That many saints before us have been confronted with similar temptations is surely comforting, for since people of faith have been able to go through them- perhaps we can too.

Yet, while 'Everybody's got the blues' seems to state the general human condition of suffering, it doesn't quite deal with our specific pain. Imagine for a moment:

"Mummy, my head hurts"

"Well, at one point in every single person's life their head will hurt so what you're experiencing is no different from the rest of humankind throughout history."

How's that for parental encouragement? It completely ignores the particular pain of the here and now.

Too often, "Everybody's got the blues" becomes a deflection of acknowledging specific pain. Our family is hurting and needs to see a family counsellor...Well, every family has problems. She just lost her job...well, the economy is not doing too well, many people are losing their jobs. How about telling someone with depression. "Everybody's got the blues."

"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man" can be an abstract theological answer to a deep-seated individual pain. Indeed, it is one platitude among a garden variety of bumper stickers. Jesus saves. He got the whole world in his hands. Too blessed to be depressed. Many of them are even grounded in Scripture. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts [cf. Isaiah 55: 9]. I call this, the 'you're too puny to understand' platitude. When pronounced by God to Israel, it's humbling. When said by a well-intended friend to us when we're already suffering, we might feel that God simply doesn't care.

Although these platitudes speak to a facet of God, they don't quite encapsulate his fullness which explains why they often sound so hollow and offer little comfort, especially in the face of intense suffering.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, I struggle with another portion of this passage when I look at the world around us. “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” I find it very hard to believe that people in seemingly impossible situations around the world have an escape. When I think of escape, I think of solutions, from chains to no chains. But when I don’t see the solutions around me, ‘Everybody’s got the blues’ does not always cut it for me. When I can’t see the evidence of salvation, I struggle to see the savior.

Some translations of the Bible have approached this theological issue by reframing what escape means. The Good News Bible version reads “At the time you are put to the test, he will give you the strength to endure it, and so provide you with a way out”. In this version, difficult situations are not necessarily resolved, but you are strengthened. There is no straightforward escape route. Instead, God *empowers*, enabling one to withstand trial.

However we try to wrap our minds around this verse though, it is honestly theologically difficult to grapple with. Sometimes, the verse that ‘God will not let you be tempted beyond your ability’ or that “God will provide the way of escape” is hopeful because we can trust there will be eventual redemption. Yet, at other times, it may be bewildering for people who have exhausted their strength and may be wondering if God has abandoned them. It may convey to people in pain that since they couldn’t find a way of escape, they must have failed in some way, or that they simply weren’t strong enough to endure the trial. In her book ‘Trauma and Grace’, Serene Jones, theologian and president of Union Theological Seminary, interviews persons who have experienced severe trauma. She found that after a traumatic experience, the last thing people want to be reminded of, is intervention and escape because it reminds them of their previous powerlessness. To imagine God as an intervener who did not offer an escape route, makes people even more anxious. It pulls the rug from beneath their feet, suggesting that perhaps, God is not good after all.

Still, verses like “God will provide a way of escape” are often used to placate people in suffering. I myself am guilty of this. During my freshmen year, I was on the phone with a friend who is very dear to my heart, one who was crying out in desperation. The situation was messy and I didn’t see a way out. The darkness closed in. At first, I began using bible verses like bullets to defend God, every cry of my loved one was refuted with my words: ‘but God says in the Bible that “He will never leave you nor forsake you!” ’ In my helplessness, I resorted to my efficient self, thinking through the issue systematically and providing solutions- have you thought of this? How about that? My tone slowly became more business-like, my emotions suppressed because I could not withstand my discomfort at the fact that there was literally nothing I could do at that point in time. I began rambling on, at many times even speaking over this person. Then this friend, who is usually soft-spoken, raises her voice in frustration, “I don’t need you to do anything! I just need you to be with me!”

I just need you to be with me. Rather than speaking for God, what might it look like if we didn’t presume to know the answers to life’s grand questions as Christians? Are we able to sit in the unknowing and simply weep with? Remember Job’s friends? Those friends actually sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. *No one said a word to him because they saw how great his suffering was.* (cf. Job 2: 13-14) It was only after the seven days when

they started talking and trying to explain the suffering that things went wrong. Perhaps our job isn't to explain or defend suffering, but to walk alongside someone in the midst of their pain.

Many theologians have theorized about the problem of suffering and it is one of the classic questions in philosophy. Yet if we read the passage again, before diving into the theological explanations, there is a simple declaration of God's character. This is the God who declares in the Old Testament "I am who I am". So God does not only equal sign 'faithful', God is by definition and the very substance of God's character, faithful. In fact, God remains faithful even when we are faithless, for God cannot deny God's self (cf. 2 Timothy 2:13)

And our God of faithfulness did not chose to deal with our pain abstractly but came to be with us in flesh in the person of Jesus. Our high priest is sympathetic with our weaknesses, Jesus experienced and overcame all temptation common to man (cf. Heb. 4:15). Jesus did not only respond to pain theologically, he responded to pain *personally*. While the Pharisees were trying to trip him up with theological questions like healing on the Sabbath, Jesus was hanging out with the sick, touching lepers and eating with sinners. He knew that the theological questions that many asked were actually masks for pain that had been left unaddressed.

Jesus did not only respond to pain theologically, he responded to pain *personally*, in his very person, on the cross. On that cross, Jesus cried out his last words, My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? And there appeared to be no answer. There was no platitude delivered, no escape from the situation. Jesus embodied God's answer to human suffering. 'I will suffer alongside you', I will suffer *for* you.

It is in the ultimate act of love that we should hope in, and return to, even in our theological wanderings. Because of Christ who was tempted but was without sin, God extends grace to us, even when we fail to overcome our temptations. Instead of looking within at our ineptitude to withstand temptation, we turn our gaze towards Christ who overcame. Rather than putting hope in our understanding of suffering, we turn to the immutable character of God and trust that God is faithful. Instead of trying to convert people to our theological answer to the problem of suffering, we embody faithfulness.

In this campus environment and wider political backdrop of tensions and an increasing lack of trust, I believe that God is calling us to embody this Christ to each other. This is not a superstar Jesus, swooping in to provide more information, or propose solutions to very complex problems. But an Immanuel Jesus, who is with us. Jesus says to us: I see your pain. *I see you.*

So yes, everybody's got the blues, *but God cares about our specific shade of blue*- regardless of whether it is Carolina Blue or Duke Blue, Republican Red or Democrat Blue, the small patch of blue sky from a prison cell or the blue Mediterranean sea beneath fragile boats. While suffering is common to all of us, God ministers to each of us personally, and to our neighbors too.

When we remember God's faithfulness and Jesus' suffering love, we fix our gaze on God's character, not on the trials. This helps us understand the 1 Corinthians passage in its larger context, a warning about idolatry. We lift our eyes from our temptations to God, from our specific pain to the character of God and His purposes. We lift our eyes from our specific suffering and identify with Jesus in his. By turning to the cross, we simultaneously nurse our pain and desire healing not just for ourselves, but for society as a whole. Because everyone does have the blues.

One of my favorite passages in the Old Testament is the one about Elijah fleeing from Jezebel. Elijah is exhausted to the point that he requests death 'O Lord, take away my life for I am no better than my fathers.' Elijah is just tired of living. Yet, shortly after, God asks him 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' and provides him a task (to anoint kings over Syria and Israel). Hmm... Wait a moment, God! Don't you realize that just a moment ago he was requesting death? Why are you now giving him work?

This almost seems insensitive but when I read the story again and again, I realize that God is restoring Elijah in his ministry, not treating him like damaged goods broken by trial but just as capable of fulfilling the good works that God had prepared in advance for him to do (cf. Ephesians 2:10). And not without help.

God does not dissolve His mission for Elijah because Elijah is beaten down. Rather, God strengthens him for the journey and provides in the journey: God sends an angel to bake a cake on hot stones for Elijah. A warm cake in the middle of the wilderness, what a tender gesture! Through an angel, God compassionately acknowledges the difficulty of the trial and *nourishes*. "Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you", the angel says. And Elijah completes His mission faithfully, with nutrition just enough for the next task ahead. It gives new meaning to "give us this day our daily bread"--an Indonesian translation of that part of the Lord's Prayer reads, 'Give us this day food that is just enough for the day'. In a culture of accumulation, this prayer reminds us that God does not promise us an all-you-can-eat buffet, but just enough for each day. As Elijah lifts his eyes from the trial to God, God acknowledges the trial and provides, with food just enough for the day.

I love Elijah's story because it is an example of God meeting His people where they are and journeying with them, from near-death to restoration, from chronic burn-out to the fulfillment of God's purposes. Where are you situated in this story and what might God be saying to you in this season of Lent?

Are you called to be in the wilderness? Or perhaps you just need to lay down and remember that God will provide hot cakes, just enough for the day. Maybe *you* are called to be hot cakes or soul food, for someone one who has the blues, walking alongside and providing a listening ear.

Lord, help us hold our pain with grace as we journey through life and accomplish the purposes you have willed for us. May we embody Christ to people in pain, seeing their pain and being with them. May we trust that you are who you say you are- you are faithful. Amen.