

Suffering and Sovereignty, Week 5

Sampson, "Praising God Saves Me in My Pain;" Enns, *The Sin of Certainty*, chapter 6, pp. 156-159; 166-170

1. Read Aubrey Sampson's blog post, "Praising God Saves Me in My Pain." Sampson's response to suffering depends in no way on meaning, or on hope that the suffering will end. What *does* it depend on? What does this mean and how does it address the question of *why* God allows us to suffer?
2. The title of Sampson's article implies that her worship helps her endure suffering. When you have faced difficult times, which of these has offered the greatest solace?
 - a. Public worship
 - b. Private worship
 - c. Reading scripture
 - d. Studying scripture
 - e. Wine and good food (Eccl. 9:7)
 - f. Fellowship with others
 - g. Meditation
 - h. Prayer (including lament)
 - i. Other: _____

3. Suffering often accompanies times of doubt, when God seems distant or absent. We are prone in these times to question our understanding of who God is and what his will is: "Doubt strips away distraction so we can see more clearly the inadequacies of who we think God is and move us from the foolishness of thinking that *our* God is *the* God" (158). For Enns, what we interpret as trust in God may be trust in believing what we think of as the right things. Doubt, according to Enns, helps us see where we are making God in our own image.

We can doubt in many things. We can doubt in false beliefs, as Enns addresses. We can doubt in true beliefs, such as God's very existence. And our doubts can be more relational: we can doubt that God will be there for us, or with us. The Bible contains a treasury of doubters. Which of the following experienced the sort of doubt that Enns is discussing? For which of these did doubt lead to deeper trust in God?

- a. Gideon (Judges 6:36-40)
 - b. John the Baptist (Mt 11:1-7)
 - c. Thomas (John 20:24-25)
 - d. Zechariah (Lk 1:18-25)
 - e. Job (Job)
 - f. David (e.g. Ps 88)
 - g. Abraham and Sarah (Gen 17:17-22; 18:10-15)
 - h. Jesus (Mt 27:46; Ps 22:1)
4. Enns uses the example of Kavanaugh's brief conversation with Mother Teresa (169) to illustrate that God may call us to times when we must trust him despite our doubts. For Enns, God desires for us times when clarity is missing in order to deepen our faith in him. Enns writes,

The darkness does us a favor of exposing control as an illusion. When everything is removed, "Where can I take back some control here?" eventually ceases being the active question and is replaced with a plea: "Lord, help me let go of control. Help me die. Help me trust." That choice, it seems to me, sums up the life of Christian faith. (170)

Have you ever experienced the sort of darkness Enns describes?

Leader's Intro:

This week's discussion focuses on two readings. The first was handed out last time but we didn't get to it. It's a blog post from CT:women which is by a woman who has experienced significant suffering and uses Lamentations to articulate the idea that she pursues God for God's sake alone. Lam focuses reaches its pinnacle in 3:22-33, where the author (putatively Jeremiah) turns from hope to despair on the basis of God's *hesed*. The one question we discussed in this vein is #1, listed below. So this hangs on the ideas of enduring suffering by recognizing God's *hesed*; the second is the idea of pursuing God for God's sake alone.

The second half of this discussion focuses on an excerpt from chapter 6 of Enns' *The Sin of Certainty*. In this chapter he addresses the central theme of his book, which is that the ultimate measure of spiritual health is not doctrinal certainty but trust. Suffering can bring about times of doubt and particularly times when God seems absent entirely. Enns addresses this. His thesis is that doubt is a healthy thing in that it helps us discard our ideas of God which are too small. This idea by itself is not revolutionary, though Enns does a good job of articulating it. Our discussion must discern between the sort of doubt which leads to deeper trust and doubt which leads to loss of faith.

Extra questions and observations:

1. Read Lamentations 3:22-33. The “steadfast love” of the Lord refers to God’s hesed, a Hebrew word for which there is no corresponding English word, but which combines elements of love, mercy and faithfulness. Read the attached passages involving God’s hesed. What aspect of hesed might justify the hope of 3:24?
2. Read Lamentations 3:12. Lamentations is written about a people suffering God’s righteous anger. Is it still relevant to us? Have you ever, when suffering, felt as the author does in 3:7-12?
- 3.
4. ...
5. ...
- 6.

Notes

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I. Background

a. ...

II. Words and Phrases

a. ...

III. Themes

a. ...

IV. Observations

a. ...

V. Questions

a. ...

VI. To do

a. ...