

## NO COMPARISON

Henry Francis Lyte, vicar in the fishing village of Lower Brixham, Devonshire, England, ministered faithfully for twenty-three years to his seafaring people. He and his wife Anne lived in a house provided by King William IV, who had been impressed with Henry's ministry. At water's edge, its coastal views were among the most beautiful on the British Isles. Henry laid out walking trails through the estate's forty-one acres and enjoyed the tranquility of the house and grounds. There he wrote most of his sermons, poems and hymns.

But Henry's lung condition hung over the home like a blackening cloud. They suffered damp winters, and while in his early fifties Henry realized his lung disorder had deteriorated into tuberculosis. On September 4, 1847, age 54, he entered the pulpit with difficulty and preached what was to be his last sermon. He had planned a therapeutic holiday in Italy. "I must put everything in order before I leave, he said, because I have no idea how long I will be away."

That afternoon he walked along the coast in prayer, then retired to his room, emerging an hour later with a written copy of *Abide With Me*. Shortly afterward, Henry embraced his family a final time and departed for Italy. Stopping in Avignon, France, he again revised *Abide With Me* - it was evidently much on his mind - and posted it to his wife.<sup>1</sup>

We'll pick up Henry's story later on, but for now, let's imagine ourselves in the place of someone who could write lines like these, "Come not in terrors, as the King of kings, But kind and good, with healing in Thy wings, Tears for all woes, a heart for every plea— Come, Friend of sinners, and thus abide with me."

Don't appear to me as a frightening figure of authority and strength, Lord, but show yourself to be kind and powerful to heal, bringing your own sorrow for my distress and trouble because you are a friend to these humans you have created.

Is that a prayer you might have spoken in your life, asking God to visit you with comfort and kindness, to stay with you in your pain and sadness? Suffering is a universal reality. Some suffer greatly at the hands of people and governments and the forces of nature. Others suffer in their own private ways, feeling the effects of betrayal or disease or tragedy. Some truly suffer in silence and will not let anyone into their lives to share their pain.

Paul gave us this triumphant proclamation that we are no longer guilty in God's system of justice, that we are called to live by the Spirit of God and not by the demands of the body. Turning from that great news he then reminds us that "*If we suffer with him, we shall also be glorified with him. For I am convinced that the sufferings of this present age cannot be compared with the glory which is destined to be disclosed to us.*"

We share in God's glory because we share in His suffering. How do we feel about sharing in suffering as a part of God's family? We suffer in general as members of a family through

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<sup>1</sup>Morgan, Robert J., *Then Sings My Soul – 150 of the World's Greatest Hymn Stories*, pg. 119

illness, crisis, loss of job, disappointment or death. Only God can take that all and make it worth something. Or as the words of Paul appear in a modern translation, *“Our temporary minor problems are producing an eternal stockpile of glory for us that is beyond all comparison.”* They may be temporary and minor in the grand scheme of things, but when they are happening to us they feel monumental.

And yet, not even the worst suffering in the world compares with the glory of God we will see when Christ returns and is revealed in all His splendor for all to see. World hunger, AIDS, genocide, racism and global disease? Civil unrest, corruption, greed and child abuse? It can't stand up to God's glory. No contest. Not even close.

If you think it was easy for me to write that statement you would be wrong. My stomach turned and my head pounded as I thought about the worst problems people face and more. To list these horrors and then dismiss them as nothing was not easy for me from a human perspective. But when I have to compare them to what God has waiting for those who belong to Him I can take Paul at his word.

You see, it's not only we who are waiting to see what God will make out of this mess we call Earth, but the earth itself and all of creation are breathlessly anticipating what happens in the end. All of what God has made is looking forward to the day when God's people are fully known, fully seen, fully represented as they were meant to be. The glory is not just God's, but ours to share.

Sharing in present suffering is a condition of our future glory. You might say glory isn't really all that appealing in the midst of suffering. Maybe that's a condition you'd like to opt out of if possible. Frankly, I would give up suffering altogether, my own or anyone's, if it meant that my faith would be stronger for the lack of it.

But that would be incorrect thinking, because the truth is that our faith is made stronger by what we endure in this life, simply because of that four letter word we cling to in times of distress – hope. *“For it is by hope we are saved; but a hope which is already visible is not a hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, then with patience we eagerly wait for it.”*

We've already heard from Paul a few chapters ago that there is a natural progression to suffering. It produces endurance, which produces character, which produces hope. We can't ignore his use of the word in relation to suffering. Christ's suffering is what brings us any hope at all.

It's not only we who suffer, but the whole of creation was knocked off kilter when sin entered the picture. The author of *Paradise Lost* wrote, *“When humanity sinned, Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat Sighing through all her Works gave signs of woe, That all was lost.”* We know the truth. All was not lost and never has been. It's simply coming around to a glorious conclusion.

We have to suffer. Sounds rather harsh, I know, but that is a natural part of life, after all. We have to suffer temporarily because what we are going through now is nothing compared to what God will give us later. If we suffer with God, we will be glorified with Him. Whatever we go through, no matter how bad, how unspeakable, it will all go away and be out shadowed by the glory to come. There will come a time when God will reveal His true children to the world.

C.S. Lewis said that if we can live with evil in the world and not be upset, something is wrong with us. We can never be content with merely our own release from the evil forces in the world, but we must serve God faithfully until He completes His salvation in every part of the world.<sup>2</sup>

We are heirs of a greater destiny than we normally realize. Though its full splendor may elude our minds, there are available even now testimonies to both its nature and its character. The first testimony is the unsatisfied yearning of the created order. The thoughtful observer needs no convincing that we live in a world which has gone mysteriously but radically wrong.<sup>3</sup>

Imagine the whole creation, things seen and unseen; planets, stars, black holes, squid and salamanders, cockatoos and crickets, glaciers and mountain ranges, daffodils and crab grass – all standing on tiptoe, excited, breathlessly waiting to catch a glimpse of God’s final act of creation and transformation, the human race as it should be, all complete and lacking nothing.

What will that be like? According to Paul it will make any and all human suffering pale in comparison, fading away like a faint memory or a whisper. Until then the second testimony to this destiny of ours must suffice, and that is the groaning of the human race in anticipation. As the pains of childbirth produce a great effort resulting in an even greater joy, so the awaiting of our true selves prompts us to cry out. We can’t stay silent, something demands an acknowledgement of the effort. A new life is here.

And yet, we are still waiting for that new life to come to its conclusion. One author said, “Christians are involved in the human situation. Within, they must battle with their own evil human nature; without, they must live in a world of death and decay. Nonetheless, Christians do not live only in the world; they also live in Christ. They do not see only the world; they look beyond it to God. They do not see only the consequences of human sin; they see the power of God’s mercy and love. Therefore, the keynote of the Christian life is always hope and never despair. Christians wait not for death but for life.”<sup>4</sup>

Knowing then, that suffering and tragedy are a part of life, a life that will be redeemed by God who turns what was meant for evil into good, we are prepared to hope and wait. Turning our backs on God will not change what happens in the world. Even if we turned our backs on God and said, “Enough is enough,” we will still grow old and die. We will still experience the death

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<sup>2</sup>[www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org)

<sup>3</sup>Harmon, Nolan B., *General Editor, The Interpreter’s Bible, Volume IX*, pg. 518

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, William, *The New Daily Study Bible, The Letter to the Romans*, pg. 130-131

of family and friends; still hear stories on the news that make us sick with despair. The only difference is that we will have given up on the promise that such events will not last forever.

As I read in preparation for this message today, one verse in Psalm 86 struck a chord with me. I wonder how the author met the burdens of his day and the events of his world and stayed in touch with God. Psalms are great places to find a release for your frustration, by the way, or to find solidarity with someone who felt the way the you feel at times. This author wrote, *“Teach me your way, O Lord; I will walk in Your truth; let my heart be undivided in reverence for Your name.”*

An undivided heart is one that can live in the world of chaos and sin and still place its loyalty and trust in God. There is a place in the book of Jeremiah that says much the same thing, *“They shall be my people and I will be their God. I will give them a single heart and a single nature to revere Me for all time, and it shall be well with them and their children after them. And I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them and that I will treat them graciously.”*

Such confidence in God shows itself in a balance between faith and hope, between reality and longing. Going back to the story of Henry Lyte, clergyman and author of *Abide With Me*, after he mailed his poem to his wife, he arrived at the French Riviera and checked into his hotel in Nice, France. On November 20, 1847, his diseased lungs finally gave out. Another English clergyman, a Rev. Manning who happened to be staying in the same hotel, attended him during his final hours. Henry’s last words were *“Peace! Joy!”*

When news of his death reached home, the fishermen of the village asked his son-in-law, also a minister, to hold a memorial service. It was on this occasion that *Abide With Me* was first sung. Although we see it as a funeral song, it has been sung at many of Britain’s royal weddings. It’s not a song about death, but about life and death and new life with Christ. The suffering is not ours alone, and God is not deaf to our cries.

The Holy Spirit offers the third testimony to this truth, assisting us in prayer whenever we find words won’t come to our lips. When all we have left is silence and mute protests, the Spirit picks up our silence and carries it to God in sighs too deep for words. No one is unheard by God. No one is ignored. If you choose to suffer in silence, that’s your choice, but you will still be noticed by God.

The voice of the suffering must be a holy sound to God, not that He hears and is pleased, but that He too awaits that final day of resurrection, that glorious moment of reunion and recreation of heaven and earth.