

## To Bear Up Rather Than Blame

*“Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear the name.”* I Peter 4:16

Peter Marty, editor of *Christian Century*, was visiting a historic church some years ago when he read in its history that the first sanctuary had burned to the ground on Dec. 3, 1903. The account read, “No doubt, to train his people for greater things, it pleased the Lord to reduce this splendid edifice of worship to a gutted, smoldering ruin by a disastrous fire.”

God delights in burning churches? Such an account, says Marty, is similar to the familiar spiritual catchphrase of our age, “God has a plan for everything.” Marty goes on to say that referring to God’s plan seems to “bring a measure of comfort to many who feel a loss of control in a universe that is not always safe, predictable, or friendly. Assigning blame or credit to God for outlandish things can make hard or inexplicable situations suddenly seem reasonable.”

This is nothing new. A pastor I knew many years ago lost an eye to disease. In the hospital, a member of the congregation said something to the effect, “God must have needed that eye.” Such an outlandish reason for losing his eye did not sit well with the pastor.

Peter Marty relates a similar story. A teenage boy was rushed to a hospital when a hit-and-run driver ignored a stop sign and plowed into his motorcycle. When a family friend learned that the boy’s right leg had to be amputated, she phoned the boy’s mother to reassure her that the lost leg was part of God’s plan for the son. That did not sit well with the mom either.

It’s one thing to say that God created a world in which a variety of circumstances can occur. It’s something else to say that God causes all circumstances to occur. “It turns people into passive subjects of a God who has a penchant for displaying power chaotically. Like marionettes dangling helplessly in thin air, we’d be forced to move through life while a stage-managing God yanks our strings whenever God pleases. Scripture doesn’t lend credence to this idea. Jesus never counsels people to accept their suffering as the Lord’s will. God may work in inscrutable ways, but there’s no evidence that God works in nonsensical ways.”

Rather than God as the cause of our suffering, Jesus made it clear that God’s sustaining presence helps us deal with our suffering. And “how we bear our suffering can make all the difference in the world for how we love life, express faith, and avoid cheapening God.”

During WWII there was a horrible prison camp on the Kwai Noi River in Thailand. The plight of these men of the Allied Forces was immortalized in the movie, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. 12,000 POWs died of disease, starvation, and brutality building a railroad for the enemy. Working in heat that sometimes hit 120 degrees, husky men became walking skeletons in just a matter of weeks. Morale was zero: something had to be done.

Two prisoners organized Bible study groups. The results were incredible in terms of the power released in the prisoners’ lives by their prayers. They not only endured their mistreatment, but they came to an understanding of their plight. Ernst Gordon and Clarence Hall write, “We ceased thinking about ourselves as victims...and began to grasp the truth that suffering does not come from God, and that the way out of suffering is *through* it, not by avoiding it or denying its existence.” God’s not to blame for everything, but God always helps us bear up. – DJ