Afflicted like us

(Heb. 4:14-16)

In our part of the world some of our workers have recently gone through very difficult experiences including the loss of a daughter. Others face trials in court and other difficult experiences and we seek to help many who have believed in Jesus and are being persecuted and suffering in different ways.

One of the points the writer of Hebrews is making in Heb. 4:14-16 is that no believer ever passes through the fire on his/her own. He argues that the Lord Jesus is profoundly sympathetic to His children who are suffering because He was tested just as we are. What is more, He is not just sympathetic but truly empathetic. He feels **for** us and **with** us because He felt **like** us.

This can be seen more clearly in the terrible physical, emotional and spiritual stresses that the Lord Jesus suffered on the Cross. We can draw immense comfort from the fact that some of these experiences are common to us. But no comparison is allowable between the atoning nature of the suffering of Jesus and our suffering. His suffering is unique. Neither can we fail to realise that His suffering was of an intensity and quality totally beyond our comprehension.

So it is with some reluctance that I draw comparisons. I would not presume to do so but for the words of Hebrews 4: 14-16***, "Who has been tested, tried, afflicted in every way just as we are …."***

Here are five insights from the life of Jesus on earth of circumstances that many believers in difficult situations also experience:

Jesus couldn't share his terrible desolation with anyone.

He couldn't share with His disciples in the garden or with His disciples around the Cross or even with His mother. He couldn't share with His Father who temporarily forsook Him when He was made sin for us. Our Lord Jesus knew that no one would even remotely understand His feelings, His agony and His pain, let alone feel with Him empathetically. His anguish of soul in the words, ***"My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?"*** reveals an isolation and loneliness that all but devastated Him. Up to that moment Jesus had never sensed any break in His permanent and ongoing fellowship with God the Father and with the Holy Spirit. (see Jn. 17)

Now as He hangs helplessly on the Cross, at the mercy of Roman soldiers and the weather, He senses a total breakdown in this eternal, triune fellowship. Gone suddenly and horrifyingly is the warmth of fellowship and mutual love. Gone is the divine friendship between Him and the Father and the Spirit. Just for a moment the cry of desolation went deeper in despair than any man or woman has ever experienced throughout the total history of mankind. He was forsaken of God. He was cast out of God's presence in order to take the full weight of our guilt and punishment.

So brothers and sisters in affliction and testing, you are not coming to a Lord Jesus who merely shows a little sympathy, but with no understanding. His loneliness and devastation on the Cross was infinitely greater than anything you may even now be suffering. "Yes," He says as we come to Him in prayer with our hearts breaking. "I know what it is to **feel** forsaken and to **be** forsaken." So from the throne of grace He pours out His mercy and grace on us in our time of need.

Jesus knew His terrible experience was not because of any sin He had committed.

He knew perfectly well that He had never broken any of God's laws. Openly challenging the Jews He asked, ***"Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?"*** (Jn. 8:46)

As Charles Wesley expressed it in one of his hymns:

He dies to atone for sins not His own.
Your debt He has paid and your work He has done.

It is true that we suffer because we are born sinners. We sin daily and we live in a fallen world. It is also true that particularly difficult periods in the life of a believer may not because of any sin committed by him/her or because he/she has missed God's will.

What is more, in our sane moments we know that this is true. The experience of Job is a case in point. But try telling your conscience that! Our fellow believers, friends, family and supporters may not have the names of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, Job's friends, but they often have the same arguments. The hardest thing is to try to duck the fiery arrows of ***"the great accuser of the brethren"!***

Brothers and sisters in affliction and trial, examine your hearts carefully and wisely. Don't let Satan stampede you into acknowledging sin or sins you have never committed. Don't conclude that your affliction and suffering is because of such "sins" or lack of faith or lack of complete surrender or because of somehow missing God's will.

The Lord Jesus knew His suffering was for '*sins not His own*'. In the same way our affliction and trouble may be part of the sanctifying process of God the Father who is, through the Holy Spirit, transforming us into the image of His Dear Son. Job said, ***"But He knows the way I take; when He has tested me, I will come forth as gold. I have kept His way without turning aside."*** (Job 23:10-11)

It may be as Paul wrote in Col. 1:24, ***"I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions … to make the Word of God, fully known".***

Jesus knew the pain of perplexity.

I hope it isn't being irreverent to suggest that perhaps Jesus' anguished cry suggests a certain amount of bafflement on His part – an uncertainty and perplexity about Himself, about His relationship to the Father, about His calling and work, about His assigned task and about being forsaken by the one person He had always been at one with.

Indeed there is a suggestion of surprise. "Why … has this happened?" The beginnings of this anguish can be traced back to Gethsemane where we read what He experienced, ***"Being in anguish, He prayed the more earnestly and His sweat was as great drops of blood falling to the ground".*** (Lk. 22:44) The English word 'anguish' comes from the Greek word used in Luke 22 '*agon*' that has a number of related meanings – a violent struggle, agony, to be involved in combat, a place of battle.

In his commentary on Philippians, J. B. Lightfoot, commenting on the language used in Gethsemane, says it is typical of one who was confused, restless, in a distracted state produced by physical derangement or by great mental stress. Luther commented, "No wonder! No man ever feared death like this man!"

So brothers and sisters there is no pathway of perplexity that our Saviour has not already trod. Are you baffled? So was He – temporarily. Are you perplexed? So was He. Are you in great distress? So was He. Are you filled with great agony about what is happening to you? So was He. He knows what it **feels** like to be crushed and wrenched apart by the stress of it all. Let that bring you comfort.

Jesus unquestionably had to endure the full force of Satan's hatred and attack when He was at His most vulnerable.

Satan would remind Jesus of the "cursedness of the cross" and say, "Look where you've ended up! Why not face the fact that God has truly forsaken you? What kind of Messiah are you? You have no kingdom and no power! Look at yourself – crushed by the Jews and condemned to die by the Romans. Cut off in your manhood. Deserted by your disciples. You have failed – failed – failed!"

Satan attacks us when we are at our most vulnerable. It might be the loss of a loved one. It might be during a prolonged illness that the doctors say is terminal. It might be at a crisis point in the ministry that is being threatened by the courts, by war and by other calamities. Whatever it is, you know you are weak and unsteady and vulnerable – almost defenceless. It is now the enemy attacks ruthlessly and relentlessly.

When you come to the Lord Jesus you don't need to wonder whether He will understand what you are trying to express. You don't need to say, "Please bear with me Lord Jesus as I explain what is happening to me" as if to suggest you have to go into long explanations in case He might not understand it all and might not help!

Jesus not only understands our situation intellectually, He actually stood and suffered in that same circle of vulnerability and had to confront the 'great enemy' just like us. He knows how to triumph in the toughest situations.

Like many believers, it appears as if Jesus was forsaken at precisely that point in His life when He needed the Father most.

Three years earlier there had been the affirming voice of the Father at His baptism, ***"This is My Son whom I love. With Him I am well pleased."*** (Mt. 3:17)

Now there is nothing but silence! It was the custom of the Lord Jesus to rise early to have fellowship with His Father in prayer and loving mutual fellowship. Now there is nothing but silence! He hears nothing from heaven. He feels no inner voice of the Holy Spirit bringing the warmth of assurance and comfort. God the Father and God the Holy Spirit have apparently forsaken God the Son because He became sin for us. God's silence was terrible just when the Son needed Him most of all – at the climax of His work of redemption when the agony was greatest.

Brothers and sisters isn't this a familiar pattern? Don't you agree that it often seems that when we need God the most, He seems to us nowhere to be found! He has forsaken us and left us cringing in pain or so it seems to us. We turn frantically this way and that but all we hear is the echo of our prayer, "Lord, I need you desperately **now**, in this situation. Lord, why do you not answer me?"

Now in our saner moments we realise of course that God has never forsaken us and He has absolutely no intention of doing so. Though the heavens and the earth may collapse around us, His commitment to us in the Covenant of Redemption is a permanent one. He will **never** abrogate or cancel it no matter what we may ever **feel** like. For then we would be in and out of the Kingdom half a dozen times a day! It rests ultimately on the objective act of God when the Lord Jesus atoned for all our sins and then clothed us in all His absolute righteousness for our justification.

Do you understand now why we have a High Priest who is able to ***"sympathise with all our weaknesses"***? Do you understand now why the writer to the Hebrews encourages us, ***"to approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need"***? (Heb. 4:14-16)

Horatius Bonner summed it up in a hymn:

Jesus whom angel hosts adore
Became a man of griefs for me!
In love, though rich, becoming poor,
That I, through Him, enriched might be.

Call on the Lord Jesus for mercy and help. He has already gone before you on the same path of affliction and suffering and won through gloriously.