

Suffering and Eternity

A. Where are we?

There is nothing quite like an accident, a death of a loved one, or some form of trauma to shake us, shape us, redefine us, and help us to re-evaluate our lives. I think in the aftermath of the shock of losing one of our leaders, Pastor Taffy, so suddenly, it's an opportune time to re-evaluate and take stock of our lives, relationships, beliefs, values and really, look at how we are building as individuals, families, and so forth.

Tell the story of Peter G.

What it affirmed for me in terms of values and how to build.

As I go further in this message, I would like you to listen and reflect whether or not you knew Pastor Taffy well, and whether or not you were affected by his passing on. You see, we all go through difficult times. Whether it's a loss of a family member, a child with a sickness, or someone you love with a terminal illness. Whether you have been through times of intense trials and lack, or have prayed for certain breakthroughs for years and are still waiting to see the answer, whatever the difficulty is, times like these can be an opportune time for the devil to step in and whisper suggestion in our ears and get us to doubt the Word of God and God's character.

We live in a fallen world. Bad things happen to good people. Most of us will be able to relate to this message, but if you happen to be unable to relate, at some point this message will be relevant to you. There are times in life when we will have unanswered questions. At times we may feel like our theology and our picture of God is shaken. At times we may even feel that our faith is shaken to the core. We need to be able to process these things and make sense of them, without allowing our questions to paralyse us or derail our faith. We also need to search out matters and allow God to help us find answers or at the very least come to a place of peace where we can move forward without being tripped up continually by the memory or pain of a situation.

When something traumatic suddenly happens, such as the loss of a loved one or in this case, a leader in our midst, we can be stung into paralysis. In difficult times such as these, we can begin to ask questions about God, about His sovereignty, about His goodness, about the power of prayer and whether He answers prayer.

We can wonder why? Why did He allow it to happen? Did He allow it to happen, or was it the enemy who managed to take our loved one out prematurely? Was it their time to go? But then what about the immediate family? What about the children left behind, if there were any children? What kind of God would allow that to happen? How much do we really know and understand about our God? Our neat picture of the God of our Christianity is disfigured in our minds. Suddenly God is

“not who we thought He was, or who we thought He ought to be. He doesn’t do things the way we think He should or thought He would. He has not lived up to our expectations”.¹

Things don’t seem as simple as they have been before. We realise Christianity is not a one-way pass into wealth, fame, long life, comfort and success! Being a born-again child of God is not a guarantee of a trouble and pain free life.

At this point, if we allow it, our faith can be shaken. Our ability to pray faith-filled prayers can be completely eradicated. Our trust in the nature of God, or the very least our understanding of His nature can be mangled. We begin to wonder about this God of ours and how much we really know about Him and His ways. How can I boldly approach the throne of grace to find grace and mercy, when I am not fully sure who that God of that grace and mercy is and what that grace and mercy will end up looking like. Will He give me my picture of grace and mercy, or something else that I don’t really want?

You know when someone gets sick and passes on, and some of the unsaid thoughts revolve around, “Maybe his/her faith was weak”, or “Maybe those who were praying for her, their faith was weak”, or “Maybe she did something. Yes! That must be it. She opened a door for the enemy. Definitely.”....

I am so glad you have been asking these questions and wondering and thinking about it. Let’s go back the very beginning and explore a bit together.

Gen. 2:15-17

“Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.””

Gen. 3:1-5

Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of

every tree of the garden’?” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.’” Then the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

The woman was alone. It was an opportune time. Maybe you feel alone and isolated. It can be an opportune time for the enemy. He came to Eve and asked her a question, he questioned God’s Word. Then He went on and questioned God’s character. He still does the same thing today. In difficult times, in trials, and specifically in this time as a church, the enemy can come in and whisper suggestions, causing us to question God’s Word and God’s character.

We need to remember certain truths.

Ravi Zacharias says:

More than half of John’s Gospel is given over to Jesus’ suffering and purpose in coming to earth. When we bring children into the world, we wish them prosperity, health and success. None of us would wish them pain and suffering. When God sent His son into the world, there was every intention and assurance of success, but He came with the full knowledge of the path of pain and suffering that Jesus would walk in order to fulfil his purpose. For us to truly fathom this is to move into a completely different paradigm of thinking.....

We resist pain because pain debilitates and forces limitations on us; Jesus however, willingly followed the path of pain because it would bring us healing and open new horizons for us. We resist pain because we think of the “now” rather than life’s ultimate purpose; Jesus endured pain in order to restore ultimate purpose to us and our existence. We resist pain because we are drawn towards that which brings us comfort and a sense of well-being; Jesus experienced pain so that we would find our ultimate comfort and well-being in God and in doing His will.¹

When Jesus came, He came to seek and save the lost. Not to be wealthy, famous and make a name for Himself. When Jesus prayed, he prayed that His Father’s Kingdom would come. He sought first the kingdom and in doing that He influenced the World for eternity. He lived and suffered and died for that purpose. He knew His purpose, and because of that, he could endure the hardships and be obedient even to death on a cross. He ran His race well. He lived for eternity. Jesus was the only perfect child of God and it didn’t protect him from pain and suffering. Let me say that

again. Jesus was perfect. He had perfect faith. He was the perfect Son of God. He suffered, was falsely accused, rejected, abandoned and murdered. He died at a very young age. His mother who was called blessed and highly favoured, outlived her son.

Jesus suffered. In fact in the garden of Gethsemane we are told of Jesus, “(He) fell on His face, and prayed, saying, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.” Sometimes the will of God will take us where it is uncomfortable and difficult. And it is normal to feel pain, and to cry out “let this pass if possible!”. But we need to know our race, pursue His Kingdom and live for eternity.

1 Peter 1:6-8

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honour, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.

Let's look at Paul:

He was a murderer and God called him and used him powerfully. He penned a large portion of the New Testament. What an honour you might say? Let's see what he endured:

2 Cor. 11:23-27 NLT

Are they servants of Christ? I know I sound like a madman, but I have served him far more! I have worked harder, been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have travelled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm.

Paul was faithful to the call of God upon his life. He was sorely persecuted and finally beheaded, at Rome, under the emperor Nero, A.D. 69.

Let's look at the other martyrs just for good measure:

John The Baptist Beheaded - John the Baptist, Son of Zacharias and Elizabeth, beheaded in the castle of Machaerus, at the command of Herod Antipas, A.D. 32.

Jesus Christ Crucified - Jesus Christ, the Son of God, crucified at Jerusalem.

(Note: The death of Christ was not simply the death of a martyr, as Catholics and many others falsely believe. Christ died sacrificially – suffering the judgment of God as the Divine Substitute for the sins of His people.)

Stephen Stoned To Death - Stephen, one of the seven deacons of the church at Jerusalem, stoned without the gate of the city, by the Libertines, A.D. 34, shortly after the death of Christ.

James Slain With The Sword - James, the son of Zebedee, put to death with the sword, by Herod Agrippa, in Jerusalem, A.D. 45.

Apostle Philip Stoned To Death - The holy Apostle Philip, bound with his head to a pillar, and stoned, at Hierapolis, in Phrygia, A.D. 54.

James, The Brother Of Christ, Beaten To Death - James, the son of Alphaeus, or brother of the Lord, cast down from the temple, stoned, and beaten to death with a club, A.D. 63.

Barnabas Burned Alive - Barnabas, a companion of the Apostle Paul, dragged out of the city and burned, at Salamina in Cyprus, A.D. 64.

Mark Dragged To Death - Mark, (author of the Gospel of Mark) the holy Evangelist, dragged to the stake at Alexandria, died on the way, A.D. 64.

Apostle Peter Crucified - Simon Peter, the holy Apostle, crucified with his head downward, under Emperor Nero, A.D. 69.

Aristarchus Slain - Aristarchus, a traveling companion of Paul, slain at Rome, under Nero, about A.D. 70.

Epaphras Slain - Epaphras, a fellow prisoner of Paul, slain under Nero, about A.D. 70.

Four Friends Of Paul Martyred - Four fellow laborers and relatives of Paul, namely, Priscilla, Aquila, Andronicus, and Junia, martyred at Rome, under Nero, about A.D. 70

Silas Scourged And Martyred - Silas, or Silvanus (ministry partner to Apostle Paul), scourged at Philippi, in Macedonia, and died a martyr, about A.D. 70.

Onesiphorus And Porphyrius Tied To Wild Horses, Dragged To Death - Onesiphorus, a friend of Paul, and Porphyrius, his companion, tied to wild horses, and dragged, or torn to death, at Hellespontus, through the edict of Nero, About A.D. 70.

Andrew Crucified - Andrew, the holy Apostle, crucified at Patras, in Achaia, about A.D. 70.

Bartholomew Tortured And Beheaded - Bartholomew, the holy Apostle of Christ, first greatly tortured, then flayed alive, and finally beheaded, in Armenia, by King Astyages, about A.D. 70.

Thomas Tortured And Burned In A Furnace - Thomas, (sometimes called “Doubting Thomas”) the holy Apostle of Christ, tormented with red-hot plates, cast into a furnace, and his side pierced with spears by the savages at Calamina, about A.D. 70.

Matthew Beheaded - Matthew, the holy Evangelist (author of the Gospel of Matthew), nailed to the ground, and beheaded at Nad-davar, under King Hytacus, about A.D. 70.

Simon Zelotes And Judas Thaddeus Slain - Simon Zelotes and his brother Judas Thaddeus, both slain for the truth of Christ – the one crucified, and the other beaten to death with sticks, about A.D. 70.

Matthias Stoned And Beheaded - Matthias, the holy Apostle of Christ (the apostle who replaced Judas Iscariot), tied on a cross upon a rock, stoned, and then beheaded, A.D. 70.

Luke Hanged - Luke, the holy Evangelist (author of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles), hanged on a green olive tree, in Greece, A.D. 93.

Antipas Roasted Alive - Antipas, the faithful witness of Jesus Christ, burned at Pergamos in a red-hot brazen ox, A.D. 95.

Apostle John Banished - John, the holy Evangelist (author of the Gospel of John, The Epistles of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John, and the Revelation of Jesus Christ), banished to the Isle of Patmos, by Emperor Domitian, A.D. 97.

Timothy Stoned To Death - Timothy, (to whom was written the Epistles of First and Second Timothy) the spiritual son of the Apostle Paul, stoned to death by the heathen idolaters at Ephesus, about A.D. 98. ²

“What does this have to do with the passing on of Ps Taffy?” you might say? Or what does this have to do with the trial and suffering I am facing right now? Well, nothing and everything. Nothing because we know he wasn’t martyred. And everything because our processing of his passing on needs to be filtered through the infallible revealed Word of God. The processing of our difficulties and challenges needs to be filtered through the word. Facing rejection? Jesus faced the ultimate rejection. Facing misunderstanding? You are in good company. Jesus and most of God’s prophets faced that. Facing other challenges? James addresses us:

Jm. 1:2-4

Consider it nothing but joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you fall into various trials. Be assured that the testing of your faith [through experience] produces endurance [leading to spiritual maturity, and inner peace]. And let endurance have its perfect result and do a thorough work, so that you may be perfect and completely developed [in your faith], lacking in nothing.

If we are going to question, that is good, but let’s question the right things. Let’s question the things that needs to be questioned. The Word of God is sure and solid. That doesn’t need to be questioned.

We know all these I mentioned were martyrs, but the point is that being a good Christian doesn’t exclude you from suffering. In fact, being a “good” Christian and pursuing God’s purpose for each of our lives, may lead us through suffering.

Listen to the Apostle Paul again:

2 Cor. 6:4-10

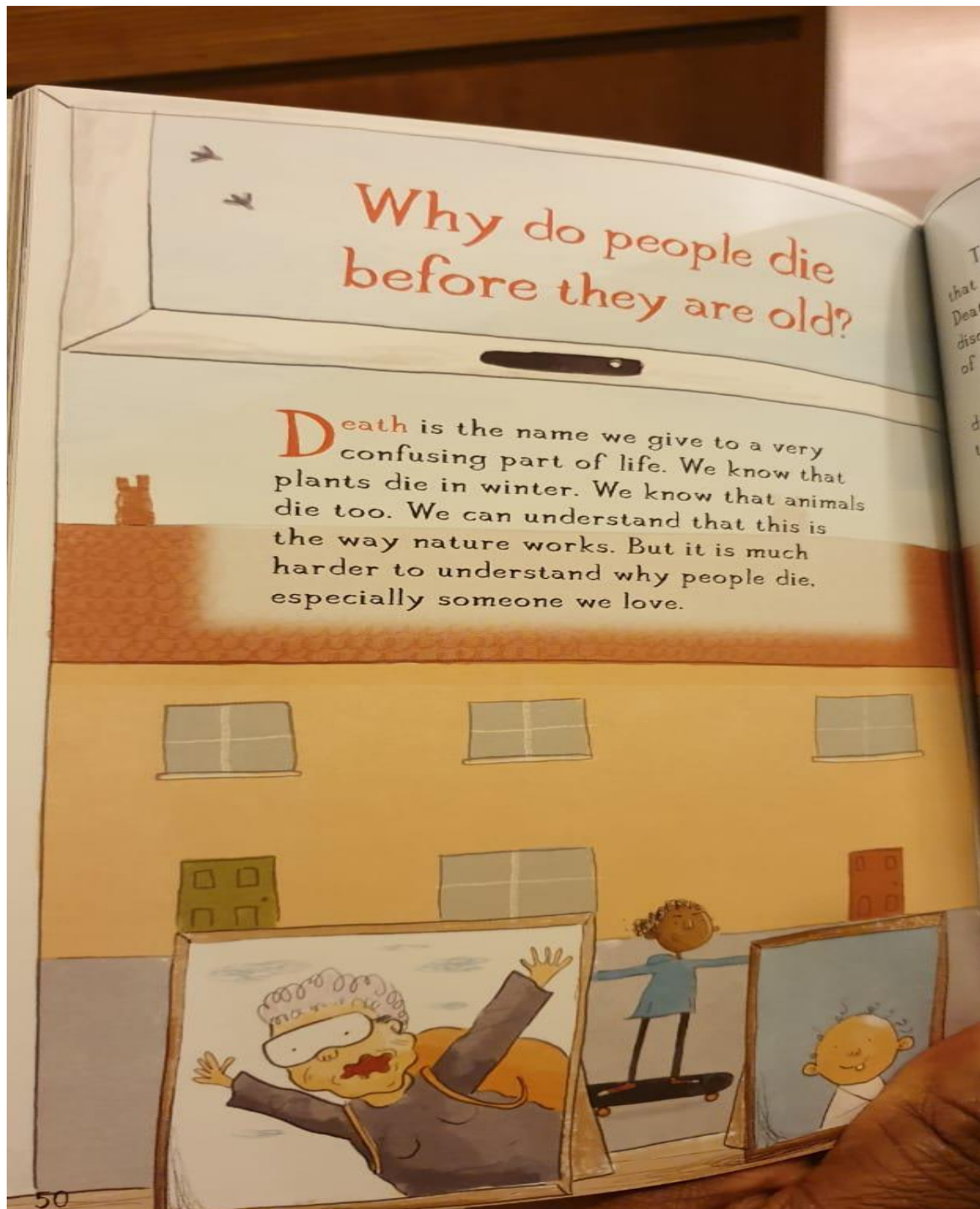
In everything we do, we show that we are true ministers of God. We patiently endure troubles and hardships and calamities of every kind. We have been beaten, been put in prison, faced angry mobs, worked to exhaustion, endured sleepless nights, and gone without food. We prove ourselves by our purity, our understanding, our patience, our kindness, by the Holy Spirit within us, and by our sincere love. We faithfully preach the truth. God’s power is working in us. We use the weapons of

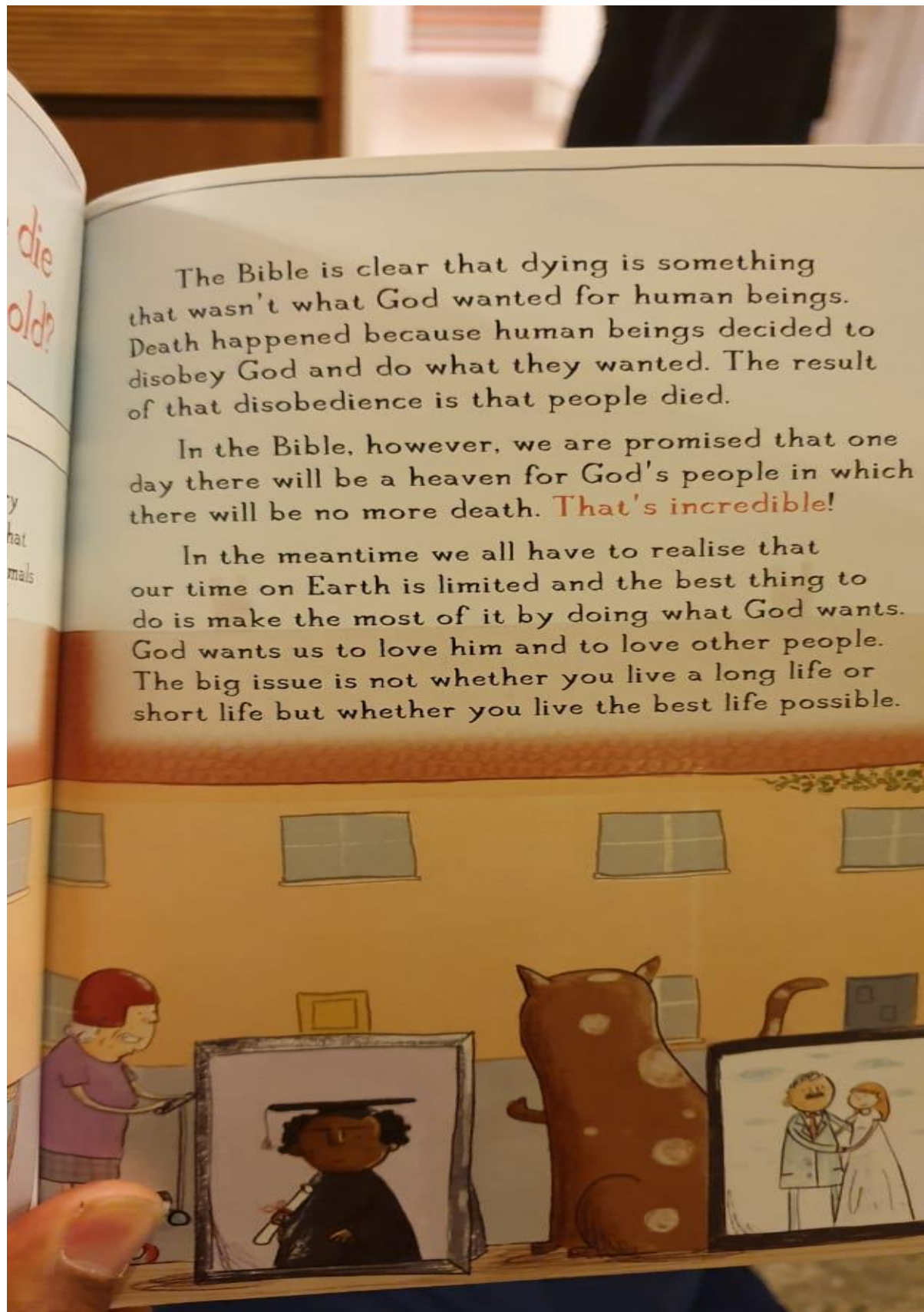
righteousness in the right hand for attack and the left hand for defence. We serve God whether people honour us or despise us, whether they slander us or praise us. We are honest, but they call us impostors. We are ignored, even though we are well known. We live close to death, but we are still alive. We have been beaten, but we have not been killed. Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others. We own nothing, and yet we have everything.

The question is not whether difficult times will come. The question is what will you choose to do when they do come. What attitude will you adopt? What voices will you listen to? Will you entertain challenges to the Word of God and the truth of the Word of God?

At the end of the day, our only foundation is the Word of God. That is what we know we can stand on for sure. It is unchanging. It is true. We had better make sure when we read it, that we understand what was written and what was actually being said. We had better be sure when we listen to our favourite preacher on TV, that what they are teaching lines up with the unadulterated Word of God.

It was never God's intention for there to be death and dying, sickness and suffering. In fact, when God created the world, there was none of these things. The world was perfect. I love what a particular children's book by J. John says:





The reality is that man sinned and chose to disobey God. In that act, sin, disease, sickness and death entered the world. The world we live in is still fallen.

Rom. 5:12-18

When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. Yes, people sinned even before the law was given. But it was not counted as sin because there was not yet any law to break. Still, everyone died—from the time of Adam to the time of Moses—even those who did not disobey an explicit commandment of God, as Adam did. Now Adam is a symbol, a representation of Christ, who was yet to come. But there is a great difference between Adam's sin and God's gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ. And the result of God's gracious gift is very different from the result of that one man's sin. For Adam's sin led to condemnation, but God's free gift leads to our being made right with God, even though we are guilty of many sins. For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ. Yes, Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone. Because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners. But because one other person obeyed God, many will be made righteous.

God's love always triumphs. Even though He knew Adam would sin, and death would enter the world, He was willing to send His beloved son to suffer and die for us, that we may have right relationship with Him, new life in Him and live with Him in eternity one day.

B. Where are we going?

From Suffering to Glory

Rom. 8:18

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

2 Cor 5:8

We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.

The Judgment Seat of Christ

2 Cor. 5:8-11

Therefore, we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

He will not only examine our deeds, but our thoughts, motives and intentions.

1 Cor. 4:5

So, don't make judgments about anyone ahead of time—before the Lord returns. For he will bring our darkest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives. Then God will give to each one whatever praise is due.

Jesus will make a decision for us regarding eternity and our reward, from an investigation into our deeds, words, thoughts, motives, intents.

Hebrews 6 tells us that these judgements are eternal judgements. **Forever judgements.** There will never be any revisions to his decisions.

- What we do with the cross determines **where** we spend eternity.
- The way we live as believers determines **HOW** we spend eternity.

1 Cor. 3:9-15

For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building. According to the grace of God, which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and other builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

We are builders. We have been called to build something. There are works we have been prepared for and that have been prepared for us.

1 Cor. 9:24

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.

Heb. 12:1-3

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.

If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.

C S Lewis

2 Pet. 1:10 NET

“Brothers and sisters, make every effort to be sure of your calling and election...”

To run a race, you must know the route. Explain what happened at SA Champs this year. When you don't know your race, how can you know when you are done?

Our race is a path that includes works that God has prepared for us to do. These are different for different people.

Eph. 2:8-9

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

We can't compare with each other.

2 Cor 10:12-14

For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise. We, however, will not boast beyond measure, but within the limits of the sphere which God appointed us—a sphere which especially includes you.

We need to do the things that God has made us and graced us and called us to do.

Ps. 139:13-16

*For You formed my inward parts;
You covered me in my mother's womb.
I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
Marvelous are Your works,
And that my soul knows very well.
My frame was not hidden from You,
When I was made in secret,
And skilfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth.
Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed.
And in Your book they all were written,
The days fashioned for me,
When as yet there were none of them.*

God has written our days in a book. He has works for us to do. And life on really is short compared to the eternity thereafter.

Is. 40:6-8

*All flesh is grass,
And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
Because the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever."*

Jm. 4:14

... whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.

I love how John Bevere puts it. He says that any finite number divided by infinity is zero. If you live to be 80 years old (we consider that a full life) and you divide that by eternity you still get zero. If you live to be 150 years old... and divide that by infinity, you get zero. Our time on earth is very, very, miniscule compared to eternity. Yet it is our time here that determines eternity. If the next one day determined how you

lived the next 10 000 years. Would you live the one day with purpose and care, or would you leave it to chance?

What we do in this very miniscule amount of time determines how we spend eternity.

Ps. 90:12 NLT

Teach us to realize the brevity of life, so that we may grow in wisdom.

2 John 1:8

Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward.

We have a choice. Always a choice. What will you choose?

Play video clip.

References

¹ Zacharias, R., 2010. Has Christianity Failed you? Zondervan, *Grand rapids, Michigan* 49530.

² http://www.sermonindex.net/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php?topic_id=52264&forum=40

³ https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=john+bevere+driven+by+eternity