

The Valley of Weeping

By Frank N. Johnson

A Question

In the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, written by Fyodor Dostoevsky, one of the main characters, Ivan, challenges his brother, Alyosha, by asking him the following question: "Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature – that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance – and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?" Alyosha's answer was that, No, he would not agree to those conditions. [Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *The Brothers Karamazov*]

Perhaps one of the oldest questions mankind has ever asked is, "Why does God apparently agree to that condition?"

Why does God allow suffering to remain in the world? Perhaps the more pressing question for some of us is, "Why does God allow suffering to remain in my life, let alone in the world?"

Why does God allow suffering to remain in the world?

What are we to say to the woman whose husband has just died? What are we to say to the 21-year-old man who has just discovered he has leukemia and four weeks to live? What are we to say to the parents whose 5-year-old child has just been run down and killed by a drunk driver? What are we to say?

What are we to say to Dostoevsky's single, tiny, tortured baby? And again, perhaps the more pressing question for some of us is, "What are we to say to ourselves when it seems that we ourselves are Dostoevsky's single, tiny, tortured baby?"

Encouragement from God's Word

None of us have truly satisfactory answers to those questions. On this side of heaven, the "why's" of suffering in our world will remain a mystery to us. But while we don't have all the answers to our questions, we can find encouragement in the word of God.

One thing which is important for us to realize is that we cannot avoid suffering in this life.

Acts 14:22 says that "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."

Peter tells us in his first epistle that we should not be surprised by painful trials as though something strange were happening to us. He goes on to say that "those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good." [1 Peter 4:12-19]

Paul wrote to the Thessalonian believers that we are destined for trials. [1 Thessalonians 3:3]

The end of Hebrews 11 teaches us that there are two manifestations of faith: one of prosperity and one of suffering. Let's read Hebrews 11:32-38 in a somewhat different way than it is written down in the New Testament. I think that after reading my version, you will agree that it does not change the central meaning of the passage, but in fact amplifies it:

"And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, (by faith they) performed acts of righteousness, (by faith) they obtained promises, (by faith they) shut the mouths of lions, (by faith they) quenched the power of fire, (by faith they) escaped the edge of the sword, (by faith) from weakness (they) were made strong, (by faith) they became mighty in war, (by faith) they put foreign armies to flight. (By faith) women received back their dead by resurrection;"

Those verses are pretty exciting for most of us. The following verses, however, are not so exciting, but they are just as much a description of what we as believers encounter in the Christian life.

"....(by faith) others were tortured, not accepting their release, in order that they might obtain a better resurrection; (by faith) others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. (By faith) they were stoned, (by faith) they were sawn in two, (by faith) they were tempted, (by faith) they were put to death with the sword; (by faith) they went about in sheepskins (and) in goatskins, (by faith they were) afflicted, (by faith they were) ill-treated. (These were) men of whom the world was not worthy; (by faith) they wandered in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground."

And so, we can't avoid suffering in this life. Both prosperity and suffering are legitimate results of faith. The New Testament call is never to escape difficulty, but always to endure and embrace it, allowing difficulty to shape our character and bring us to maturity.

How Should We Respond to Suffering?

If we can't avoid it, then how are we to respond to the suffering which we experience in life? How are we to react to the difficult circumstances which often seem so inevitable in our experience? How can we prepare ourselves so that suffering will accomplish in us what James calls the perfect or finished work of trials, maturity and completeness? [James 1:2-4]

Let's hear what the Psalmist has to say in Psalm 84. Although we will be examining verses 5-7 in more detail, I would like us to read the entire psalm, along with its title, from the New International Version of the Bible.

For the director of music. According to Gittith. Of the Sons of Korah. A psalm.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty!

My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.

Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young - a place near your altar, O Lord Almighty, my King and my God.

Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. Selah

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.

As they pass through the Valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools.

They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.

Hear my prayer, O Lord God Almighty; listen to me, O God of Jacob. Selah

Look upon our shield, O God; look with favor on your anointed one.

Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.

For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.

O Lord Almighty, blessed is the man who trusts in you.

Four Points of Background

Before examining the actual passage, I would like us to be aware of four crucial points of background.

Psalm 84: A Call to Intimacy

First of all, I would like us to note the position of Psalm 84 within the entire Psalter.

We're not often told that the position of a particular psalm within the entire psalter is important. This is unfortunate, because a psalm's position within the psalter was very important to the Israelites of the Old Testament era.

Some of us may have noticed in our readings of the psalms that they are divided into five "books." The first book of psalms is made up of psalms 1-41, the second of psalms 42-72, the third of psalms 73-89, the fourth of psalms 90-106, and the fifth of psalms 107-150.

These five "books" of psalms correspond to the first five books of the Old Testament, what we call the Pentateuch and what in Hebrew is called the Torah. And so the first "book" of psalms corresponds to Genesis, the second "book" of psalms corresponds to Exodus and so on.

This correspondence between the Psalms and the first five books of the Old Testament has been recognized by biblical scholars for centuries. In fact, the Hebrew rabbis acknowledged this correspondence by often referring to the psalter as the "Torah of David."

What does this tell us about our psalm? Psalm 84 is located in the third "book" of psalms and thus is part of the portion of the psalter which corresponds to the book of Leviticus.

What does the book of Leviticus have to do with Psalm 84? Doesn't Leviticus just say a lot about laws and sacrifices?

Leviticus takes its name in English (and in Latin and Greek) from the fact that it speaks a great deal about the role of the priests (the sons of Levi). But in Hebrew, the name of this third book of the Old Testament comes from the first word of the book, wayyqra, which means in Hebrew, "And He (the Lord) called."

When the Hebrews came to the book of Leviticus, it was with a deep sense that the Lord was calling them.

And if you read the first several chapters of Leviticus, you will discover that the Lord was calling His people to relationship with Himself. It was relationship through sacrifice, but relationship nonetheless. In fact, the entire book of Leviticus is an Old Testament manual of how to draw near to God.

And the words of Leviticus were spoken while the Israelites were in the wilderness. In their suffering, God was calling them to relationship with Himself. He was saying, "In the midst of the wilderness, come to Me; in the midst of your wanderings, come to Me; in the midst of your sufferings, come to Me. Come to Me, and live in intimacy with Me."

***In the midst of
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to relationship
with Himself***

And the call of Psalm 84 corresponds to this message of Leviticus, because like the book of Leviticus, it teaches us that in the midst of our suffering, God calls us to relationship with Himself. In the midst of difficult circumstances, God is calling us to intimacy with Himself.

The Writer of Psalm 84

The second point of background of which I would like us to be aware is the identity of the writer.

The writer of the psalm was a "Son of Korah" or a Korahite. We know this from the title of the psalm and also from verse 10 where the writer expresses his desire to be a doorkeeper in the house of his God, which was the function of the Sons of Korah in the temple.

At the time the psalm was written, the writer was either on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, or reflecting on past pilgrimages. We know this from the writer's longing for God's house which he expresses in the first four verses and from the language of verse 5 in which the writer speaks of those "who have set their hearts on pilgrimage."

The Occasion of Psalm 84

The third point of background of which I would like us to be aware is the occasion of the writing of the psalm.

Psalm 84 was written in conjunction with the Feast of Booths. We know this from the writer's reference in verse 6 to the autumn rains. Jewish males were required to undertake three pilgrimages to Jerusalem each year: at Passover, at Pentecost, and at the Feast of Booths. The only one of these three festivals which took place during the time of the autumn rains was the Feast of Booths.

In fact, Psalm 84 was traditionally sung by the Israelites at the Feast of Booths. This particular feast was an annual feast in which the Israelites were commanded to live for seven days in booths or tabernacles made of tree branches.

The Feast of Booths was designed to remind the Israelites that whether they lived in houses or in tents, they were pilgrims - their stay on earth was temporary. This is in keeping with the pilgrim nature of Psalm 84.

The Valley of Baca

And so, we have a Korahite on pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Feast of Booths.

And during his journey, he encounters a place called the Valley of Baca. And this brings us to the fourth and final point of background I wish to address: the nature of the Valley of Baca.

The Hebrew word "Baca" means "weeping," and thus, our Korahite traveler has encountered the "valley of weeping." It was a dry, arid, lifeless place.

The valley of weeping is symbolic of the trials and tribulations, the difficult circumstances, and the suffering which we, as children of God, so often encounter on our journey in the Christian life.



*A Desert Valley in Israel
(Photo Credit: Saul Adereth)*

The valley of weeping is not an option for God's child, but a necessity and a certainty. Psalm 84 does not say "if they pass through the Valley of Baca," but, "as they pass through the Valley of Baca." The

The valley of weeping is not an option for God's child, but a certainty

valley of weeping is a certainty for God's child, for those who "are without discipline....are illegitimate children and not sons." [Hebrews 12:18]

The valley of weeping represents the difficult seasons of our lives which produce character and maturity. And so James writes, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result,

that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." [James 1:2-4]

Amy Carmichael reminds us of the necessity, and even the normalcy, of the valley of weeping in the life of a believer when she writes these words:

Hast thou no scar?
No hidden scar on foot, or side, or hand?

I hear thee sung as mighty in the land;
I hear them hail thy bright ascendant star,
Hast thou no scar?

Hast thou no wound?
Yet I was wounded by the archers, spent
Leaned me against a tree to die; and rent
By ravening wolves that compassed me, I swooned.
Hast thou no wound?

No wound? No scar?
Yet, as the Master shall the servant be,
And pierced are the feet that follow Me;
But thine are whole; can he have followed far Who hath
no wound nor scar?"

[Quoted in V. Raymond Edman, *Disciplines of Life*
(Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1982), pg.
90.]

A Threefold Secret

We have seen that the valley of weeping is a necessity and a certainty for God's child. That being understood, how are we to respond to this valley of weeping when we encounter it?

Psalm 84:5-7 reveals to us a threefold secret of traversing the valley of weeping victoriously. When I write "victoriously," I am not referring to some sort of superficial happiness or glee which often seems to be the meaning of the word in some Christian circles; instead, I am referring to the fact that we will know our God more deeply as we travel through the valley of weeping; we will draw near to Him and live in greater intimacy with Him.

Allow me to quote verses 5-7 of Psalm 84:

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.

As they pass through the Valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools.

They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.

Again, according to Psalm 84:5-7, the secret of traversing the valley of weeping is threefold.

First, we must begin our journey or pilgrimage with a firm resolve.

Secondly, we must allow the goal of our journey to be the motivating force which calls us on through the valley of weeping.

And thirdly, by beginning our journey with a firm resolve and by allowing our goal to be a motivating force, we will transform apparent obstacles into blessings.

The Firm Resolve

One writer has said, "To be a Christian is to be a traveler." [Quoted in Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), pg. 7.]

Verse 5 of Psalm 84 says, "Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage."

In order to traverse the valley of weeping victoriously, we will need to begin our journey in the Christian life with a firm resolve. In order to be sure of reaching Zion, the writer of Psalm 84 had to set his heart on pilgrimage.

If we are to grow in maturity and in intimacy with God as a result of our encounter with the valley of weeping, we will need to be obstinate, stubborn and unyielding in our decision to follow Christ. Full commitment of ourselves to Christ will be required.

Those who traverse the valley of weeping victoriously are those who are determined to follow Jesus no matter how difficult their circumstances might be. We must set our hearts on pilgrimage.

***We must set
our hearts on
pilgrimage***

Experience-Oriented Christianity

This determination to be a pilgrim is in contrast to the experience-oriented Christianity which seems to be so prevalent in today's evangelical church.

Experience-oriented Christianity is a Christianity which suggests that if I don't have a glorious experience every time I come to church or if I don't experience some glorious revelation every time I open my Bible, then something is wrong.

This is not the attitude of one who has set his heart on pilgrimage. This is surface slush; this is superficial drivel; this is Christianity without substance.

We should not conclude that experiences are wrong in themselves, but we cannot allow our lives to revolve around experiences. We must seek the God who gives experiences and set our hearts on pilgrimage. If we are to benefit from our encounter with the valley of weeping, we will need to be determined to follow God even if He does not grant us glorious experiences.

We need to also realize that there is a difference between experience with God (intimacy with Him) and experiences from God (warm fuzzies, wonderful emotions, outstanding miracles).

If we have no experience with God, no intimacy with Him, then we are a miserable people. God help us if we are content only with sound doctrine and are not seeking an ongoing encounter with God.

But experience from Him - warm fuzzies and wonderful emotions and outstanding miracles - are given to us by His grace. Our lives must revolve primarily around the God of grace, not around the experiences He grants us in His grace.

This is why when the seventy disciples returned from their missionary journey and were excited because the demons were subject to them, Jesus told them, "Don't rejoice because the demons are subject to you (don't rejoice because you have had glorious experiences). Rejoice because your names are written in heaven (rejoice because you know the Father and have relationship with Him)." [Cf. Luke 10: 17-20]

Tourist or Pilgrim?

Experience-oriented Christianity (a faith which revolves around and is dependent upon warm fuzzies, wonderful emotions, and outstanding miracles, but does not seek the God who gives these things) is a Christianity for tourists rather than for pilgrims.

What is the difference between a tourist and a pilgrim?

Are you a tourist or a pilgrim?

A tourist enters a country, has some wonderful experiences, but returns to the place from which he began largely unchanged. A "Christian" tourist returns from his experiences unchanged.

A pilgrim, on the other hand, enters the same country and has the same wonderful experiences. But because he has a goal in life, the pilgrim does not return to his own country unchanged. Instead, the pilgrim allows his experiences to propel him on towards his goal. A "Christian" pilgrim allows his experiences to propel him on towards Zion, on towards maturity in the faith and intimacy with God.

The difference is in their goals. The tourist's goal is experience. The pilgrim's goal is maturity and intimacy with God, and he allows his experiences to push him on towards that goal.

Are you a tourist, or are you a pilgrim? What is your goal, experience or maturity and intimacy with God? Are you just along for the ride to see some of the sights, or have you set your heart on pilgrimage?

An Example from the Life of Jesus

I'm reminded at this point of Jesus' experience on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus is on the mountain with three of His disciples. The cloud of glory descends upon Him, and the Father speaks out of the cloud. Peter is so infatuated with this glorious experience that he wants to stay on the mountain.

And too often, like Peter, we are infatuated with experiences rather than in love with the God who gives experiences. But Jesus comes down off the mountain. The disciples must have thought that Jesus was going to now deliver Israel from the oppression of the Romans, for this was the Jewish conception of the Messiah. And when Jesus delivered a young boy at the bottom of the mountain from demonic possession, this must have only confirmed the expectations of the disciples.

And there was great joy and celebration among the people, because they would soon be free from the tyranny of the Roman empire. Their Messiah had come, and soon Israel would rule the world. Or so they thought.

But in the midst of this glorious celebration, Jesus turned to His disciples and said, "Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men; and they will kill Him;" [Luke 9:44; Mark 9:31]

And Luke records that the disciples did not understand this statement. Small wonder. The disciples were hungry for glorious experiences, but Jesus was intent on His upcoming death. A few verses later, Luke writes that when the days for Jesus' ascension were approaching, He resolutely set His face to go to Jerusalem, the place of His death. His heart was set on pilgrimage.

If we are to traverse the valley of weeping victoriously, we too will need to resolutely set our faces to go to our Jerusalem, to the place of our death, death to self. We must set our hearts on pilgrimage.

You see, beloved, the call of God is never to the glory, but always to the cross; never to glorious experiences, but always to death to self. And many are those who will follow Jesus to the Mount of Transfiguration, to the mountain of His glory; but there are only few who will follow Him to the hill called Calvary, to the mountain of His death.

An Example from Church History

We must set our hearts on pilgrimage. This is the testimony of the lives of millions of saints throughout the history of the church.

This is the testimony of the life of Girolamo Savonarola, one of my favorite personalities from church history.

Girolamo Savonarola was a 15th-century Italian monk who preached against the ungodliness of the church in his day. When the Catholic church offered him the position of cardinal (which is the position in the Catholic church signified by the wearing of a small red hat), they were attempting to appease his wrath and save the church from embarrassment.

Savonarola responded to their offer by declaring, "No hat will I have but that of a martyr, reddened with my own blood."

He had set his heart on pilgrimage, and he would not bow nor succumb to the pressures of those who would have him turn aside from pilgrimage. He had set his heart on pilgrimage, and he did not turn back at the valley of weeping.



The Execution of Girolamo Savonarola

If you have not set your heart on pilgrimage, the valley of weeping will not result in greater maturity and greater intimacy with God for you. You may pass through the valley of weeping because God is faithful even when we are faithless [2 Timothy 2: 13], but you will pass through unchanged.

The Motivating Force

The first thing we must do in order to traverse the valley of weeping victoriously is to begin our journey in the Christian life with a firm resolve. Secondly, we must allow our goal in the Christian life to be the motivating force which forcefully draws us through the valley of weeping.

Verse 7 of Psalm 84 says, "They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion."

The goal of the psalmist's journey was Zion. In the Scriptures, Zion represents more than the physical city of Jerusalem. It was the place where one encountered God, where one drew near to Him and experienced intimacy with Him. The pilgrims of Psalm 84 appear before God in Zion.

At the outset of this psalm, our pilgrim declares his deep hunger for the presence of God: "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God."

And so the psalmist's heart was possessed with a desire to be in Zion, with a desire to encounter his God, with a desire for intimacy with Him. The psalmist was able to

Is your heart possessed with a desire for intimacy with God?

traverse the valley of weeping victoriously because his desire to encounter God and grow in intimacy with Him called him on through the valley of weeping.

The goal of our journey is also Zion - again, not the physical city of Jerusalem, but that which Zion represents, the place of encounter with God, the place of intimacy with Him.

And like the psalmist, if we are to victoriously traverse the valley of weeping, our hearts will need to be possessed by a desire for Zion, by a desire for encounter with God, by a desire for intimacy with Him.

Our Citizenship is in Heaven

This deep desire which the psalmist demonstrates is in contrast to the desire of those who are Christians only for the sake of blessings, whose goal is not Zion, but comfort; whose goal is not that which is eternal, but that which is physical and material.

It is in contrast to the modern "prosperity teaching," which really isn't modern at all. Paul condemned this teaching when he clearly wrote to Timothy that those who teach that godliness is a means of financial gain are men of depraved minds who are deprived of the truth. [1 Timothy 6:3-10]

Paul went on to say that we should be content with food and clothing. And as one teacher has said before, the Greek doesn't mean "banquet and wardrobe." [The insight and language are taken from a sermon preached by Steve Savelich of Eugene, Oregon].

Later, in writing to Timothy again, Paul speaks once more of those whose goal is material blessing. In 2 Timothy 4:9-10, Paul writes some of the most tragic words in all the Bible: "Make every effort to come to me soon; for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica;"

The heart of Demas was not possessed by a desire for Zion; his heart was not possessed by a desire to encounter God; his heart was not possessed by a desire for intimacy with God. Instead, he loved this present world.

This is also the testimony of the life of Judas, who betrayed the Lord Jesus for the sum of thirty pieces of silver. His eyes were not turned towards Zion. He did not seek intimacy with God.

The words of Paul in Philippians 3:8-10 ring true here: "For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose God is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. (But), our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."

Beloved, do not set your mind or your heart on earthly things. Your citizenship is in heaven. Wait eagerly for the Savior. Seek intimacy with Him. Seek encounter with Him. Turn your eyes towards Zion.

Modern prosperity doctrine is not the gospel of the kingdom. It is not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is another gospel. It is a false gospel.

If you are not seeking intimacy with God, if you are not seeking encounter with Him, if your eyes are not turned towards Zion, but instead you are seeking comfort and material blessing, the valley of weeping will not result in greater maturity and greater intimacy with God for you. You may pass through the valley of weeping because God is faithful even when we are faithless [2 Timothy 2:13], but you will pass through unchanged.

But those whose focus is not upon that which is physical and material, but upon that which is eternal, are able to victoriously traverse the valley of weeping. Those who are seeking intimacy with the Lord, those who are seeking encounter with Him, those whose eyes are turned towards Zion, will continue on victoriously through the valley of weeping.

And so Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before Him. And according to Hebrews 12, we are to endure the discipline of the Lord, knowing it will produce holiness and righteousness in our lives.

An Example from the Life of Paul

In 2 Corinthians 11:24-27, Paul wrote of his sufferings: "Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor

Our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ

and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.”

In 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, Paul tells us how he was able to victoriously traverse these valleys of weeping: “Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

Our afflictions are momentary, but they produce an eternal weight of glory

Do you see the contrasts in those verses? Our outer man is decaying, but our inner man is being renewed. Our afflictions are momentary, but they produce an eternal weight of glory. We don't look at the things which are seen, but at things which are unseen. We don't look at temporal things, but at eternal things.

Paul was able to victoriously traverse the valley of weeping because he maintained his focus upon that which was eternal. He longed after intimacy with God, and he allowed that longing to be the motivating force which called him on through the valley of weeping.

Beloved, if you don't allow your goal - that which is eternal - to be a motivating force in your journey, if you don't long after intimacy with the Savior, if you don't long after encounter with God, the valley of weeping will not result in greater maturity and greater intimacy with God for you. You may pass through the valley of weeping because God is faithful even when we are faithless [2 Timothy 2:13], but you will pass through unchanged.

The Transformed Obstacle

If we begin our journey with a firm resolve and allow our goal to be a motivating force, we will transform the apparent obstacles which lie in our path into blessings. The sixth verse of Psalm 84 says, “As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools.”

The Hebrew word for “make” in verse 6 means “to fashion” - as a craftsman fashions shapeless blocks of wood into a beautiful piece of furniture; as a painter fashions a blank canvas into a beautiful painting; as a sculptor fashions a mass of stone into a beautiful statue.

The Hebrew word for “spring” in verse 6 means “a place of refreshment.” In the Old Testament, the word almost always is used symbolically of the presence of God.

The combination of these two Hebrew words suggests two things. First of all, time is required to fashion the valley of weeping into this place of refreshment. Again, the New Testament call is never to escape difficulty, but always to endure and embrace it, allowing difficulties to work character into our lives.

Secondly, if we respond correctly to the valley of weeping - if we have prepared ourselves by setting our hearts on pilgrimage and turning our eyes towards Zion - the valley of weeping will be a place where the God’s presence sustains us.

When you find yourself in the midst of the valley of weeping, and you have allowed the Lord to prepare you for it, the tears of your sorrows will mingle with the rain of God’s blessings to form springs and pools of God’s presence.

We need to realize that when the valley of weeping is made into a spring, we are still in the valley of weeping. The struggles continue. But the presence of the Christ is there - the presence which sustains, the presence which strengthens, the presence which encourages, the presence which transforms.

And this is the desire of God for you when you find yourself in the midst of the valley of weeping - that you might recognize the presence of your Lord; that you might experience intimacy with the Christ.

The valley of weeping will fashion you into a complete and mature believer

And then, not only will the valley of weeping be transformed, but your life will be transformed. Not only will you fashion the valley of weeping into a place where the intimate presence of the Christ is experienced, but the valley of weeping will fashion you into a complete and mature believer.

And dear one, you will take that far beyond the valley of weeping. And the valley of weeping will fade in comparison with the unutterable joy of intimacy with the Lord Jesus.

Those who set their hearts on pilgrimage and allow their goal (that which is eternal) to be a motivating force will fashion the valley of weeping into a place of refreshment, into a place where they will be sustained by the presence of God - into a place where they will be comforted by the presence, encouraged by the presence, transformed by the presence.

Your circumstances may remain difficult. You may continue to weep. But God's presence with you will sustain you.

Two Examples from the Life of Paul

The first example concerns Paul's general attitude while in prison. Do you realize that Paul never called himself a prisoner of Rome? He always called himself a prisoner of the Lord Jesus. Paul wasn't chained to Rome; Rome was chained to Paul! [The insight and language are taken from a sermon preached by Steve Savelich of Eugene, Oregon.]

And because Paul had set his heart on pilgrimage and because he maintained his focus upon that which was eternal, because he continued to seek intimacy with the Lord, a Roman dungeon was transformed into a temple in which Paul was sustained by God's presence.

The second example concerns Paul and Silas' activities while they were in prison in Philippi [cf. Acts 16]. Although they were prisoners, they did not despair. Instead, they prayed and sang hymns to God. The valley of weeping was transformed. And the presence of Christ sustained them.

And so a Philippian jailer and his entire family submitted their lives to Jesus, because they were confronted with the intimate presence of the Almighty which had invaded the valley of weeping.

An Old Testament Example

The three Hebrew children in Daniel 3 are a wonderful example. When commanded to bow before Nebuchadnezzar's idol or be thrown into the fiery furnace, their response was as follows: "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." [Daniel 3:16-18]

They had set their hearts on pilgrimage. They maintained their focus on that which was eternal. They sought an encounter with their God. And thus, when they were thrown into the furnace, Nebuchadnezzar said that he saw a fourth man in the furnace like unto a son of the gods. The intimate presence of the Christ was with the three Hebrew children in the midst of the valley of weeping.

An Example from Modern Church History

Allow me to share with you a letter which was written by a prisoner in a Soviet concentration camp. While we may not agree with every point of this man's

theology, his letter gives a vivid illustration of how the presence of the Lord will meet us in the valley of weeping.

“It is only by being a prisoner for religious convictions in a Soviet camp that one can really understand the mystery of the fall of the first man, the mystical meaning of the redemption of all creation, and the great victory of Christ over the forces of evil. It is only when we suffer for the ideals of the Holy Gospel that we can realize our sinful infirmity and our unworthiness in comparison with the great martyrs of the first Christian Church. Only then can we grasp the absolute necessity for profound meekness and humility, without which we cannot be saved; only then can we begin to discern the passing image of the seen, and the eternal life of the Unseen.

“On Easter Day all of us who were imprisoned for religious convictions were united in the one joy of Christ. We were all taken into one feeling, into one spiritual triumph, glorifying the one eternal God. There was no solemn Paschal service with the ringing of church bells, no possibility in our camp to gather for worship, to dress up for the festival, to prepare Easter dishes. On the contrary, there was even more work and more interference than usual. All the prisoners here for religious convictions, whatever their denomination, were surrounded by more spying, by more threats from the secret police.

“Yet Easter was there: great, holy, spiritual, unforgettable. It was blessed by the presence of our risen God among us - blessed by the silent Siberian stars and by our sorrows. How our hearts beat joyfully in communion with the great Resurrection! Death is conquered, fear no more, an eternal Easter is given to us! Full of this marvelous Easter, we send you from our prison camp the victorious and joyful tidings: Christ is risen!” [Ware, pgs. 116-117]

Truly, this one had seen the valley of weeping transformed into a sanctuary where the presence of God sustained him.

Conclusion

And so, dear one, do you find yourself in the midst of the valley of weeping? God is calling you to intimacy with Himself. He is crying out to you, "Come to Me! In the midst of the wilderness, come to Me! In the midst of your wandering, come to Me! In the midst of your suffering, come to Me!"

Set your heart on pilgrimage. Turn your eyes towards Zion. Then you will see the valley of weeping transformed into a temple where Jesus' presence will lift you up.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you;

but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation.

If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, **because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.** (1 Peter 4:12-14, emphasis mine)

May the Lord richly grant us grace and courage to do these things.