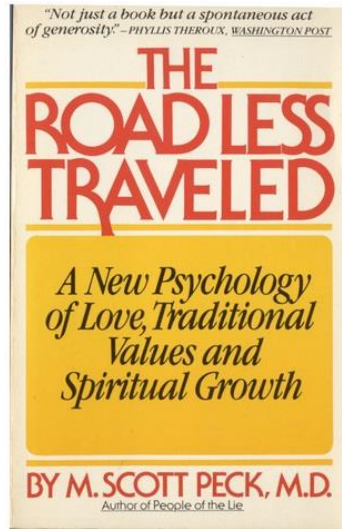


Life Is Hard



James 3:13 "Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom . . . Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. . . Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."

In 1978, American psychiatrist M. Scott Peck published his first book, entitled "The Road Less Traveled." Five years after publication it made the NYTimes best-seller list. It stayed on that list for 694 weeks, the equivalency of more than 13 years! His book has the most memorable first line of any book that I have ever read, a simple three word sentence. "Life is hard," it

read. "Life is hard (period)." Somehow, we have a difficult time acknowledging and accepting the simple fact that life is indeed hard, says Peck, that we have to make so many uncertain or unknowable decisions in our lives and then live with the consequences, while so very much of our lives is simply not in our control at all! Oh yes, sometimes we will acknowledge that *our* life is hard, that we have *our* crosses to bear and struggles to overcome, but then we look out at others and believe that *their* lives are not so hard, that they live on Easy Street. And we want what they have. We imagine that if only we had what they have, whatever it is, wealth, meaningful employment, good health, a loving spouse, respectful children, the latest gadget, if only we had that, then we deceive ourselves into thinking that *our* lives would then not be so hard anymore. But that isn't true, and deep down we know it. The suicide rate among the rich and powerful is surprisingly just as high as it is for the down and out. Life is hard for everyone. If we think someone has it easy, that their life isn't hard, then we are kidding ourselves.

Yet sadly we are all too good at hiding the difficulties of our lives, and pretending that everything is alright, that 'it's all good,' because we don't want others to see how much we are struggling. Unfortunately, we think that the struggle makes us look weak, when what in fact it makes us more human. Jesus knew

that and encouraged his disciples to take up the crosses and follow him. Life is hard. We all have crosses to bear.

Nevertheless, most of the time, most of us live on in some form or another of denial, of hiding behind our masks, polishing on our glittering images, suggesting that we don't have crosses to carry, we aren't struggling, we are happy. The problem with denial is it usually doesn't work. Denial doesn't actually help us cope with the pains and sufferings of this present age; it ignores them, by explaining them away somehow. It doesn't change the reality of our world; it simply tries to divert our gaze. God is in his heaven, and all's right with the world, we say.

But being blessed, being among the chosen ones, believing or doing the "right" things is no guarantee that tragedy won't befall us. Life is hard. Bad things do happen to good people as Rabbi Kushner reminds us in his wonderful book of that title. Kushner reminds us that most of the ways we deny the difficulties of our lives only makes things worse. For instance, Kushner tells a memorable story of a woman after the tragic death of her only son, where her clergy person took her aside and tried to comfort her with these words; "I know that this is a painful time for you," the pastor said, "But I also know that you will get through it all right, because God never sends us more of a burden than we can bear. God only let this happen to you because God knows that you are strong enough to handle it."

Whereupon the woman in the story, with tears in her eyes and her shoulders shaking in grief, said to the priest, "you mean, you mean if only I had been a weaker person, then my son would still be alive?"

Sometimes in our efforts to comfort those who are suffering or to explain away their tragedy, we inflict additional wounds upon them, we make life even harder. Too often we just try to minimize their pain by saying things like "you're not really hurt that bad" or "it's probably for the better" or "it could have been a whole lot worse." Other times we unwittingly criticize those who are suffering and how they are suffering by saying things like "oh, don't take it so hard" or "come on, try to hold back your tears, don't cry" or "get ahold of yourself!" Occasionally we just try to explain away their hurt with answers that demand that they deny or reject their true feelings, saying things like "there must have been a purpose why this has happened" or "there's always a reason" or "God has a plan" or "we have no right to question God's judgment."

Like so many of our responses to the difficulties in life, they reveal our hidden understandings or assumptions about God. Far too often, I think, we assume that God is the cause of our suffering, God is why our life is hard, and then we try to understand why God would want us to suffer so. Is it for our own good perhaps, to make us stronger, --- or is it a punishment we

deserve for something we have done, --- or could it be that God simply does not care what happens to us at all? Many of the theological answers we devise in response to the fact that life is hard are religiously imaginative, and I have heard most of them, but none of them really satisfies the needs of those who are hurting, because life is hard. So many of our pat answers lead us to blame ourselves for the hardships of our lives, in order to spare God's reputation or justify his actions. Others ask us to deny the reality of the hardness of our lives or to repress our true feelings. We are often left either hating ourselves for deserving such a fate --- or hating God for sending us such a fate we do not deserve.

Perhaps there is another way, one which accepts random suffering and pain as a part of the mystery of life, one which accepts that life is hard. Could it be that God does not cause the bad things that happen to us? Could it be that God doesn't decide which families shall give birth to a handicapped child, that God did not single out this person or that one to be crippled by a random shooting or some degenerative disease, but rather instead, ---- that God stands ready to help us cope with our tragedies, if we could only get beyond the feelings of guilt and rage that so often separate us from the love of God? Could it be that God does not look at these things the way we do? Could it be that "How could God do this to me?" is really the

wrong question for us to ask when life is hard? Perhaps the right question is 'where is God in the midst of our hardships?' And 'what good can come from this suffering?'

Those who accept the reality that life is just hard, are usually more at peace with the world. They are the ones who hold out their hands and pat our backs in the midst of our sorrows. They are the ones who don't have any easy or quick answers to explain away our pain, or any illusions that they can right all wrongs and fix things. Their hearts too have been broken --- but their fists are not clinched, and their tongues are not unbridled. And thus, they will often willingly go into the most desperate places on earth and confront the most desperate people around because they know that they don't have to come up with a solution for the problems of the world. Mother Teresa in the slums of Calcutta was such a person. There was no touch of righteous anger in her actions and no delusions that she would ever solve the problems in those slums. There was just an acceptance that life is hard, that we all need compassion and love, respect and dignity. And that those who seek to save their lives, will lose them, while those who lose their lives for the sake of the gospel, will actually save them.

In Jesus' willing acceptance of suffering and the cross, he has shown us the means of reconciliation and peace in our world. He is, as St. Paul writes, the pioneer of our faith, the

firstborn of all creation. He has revealed to us the Way, the Truth and the Life, and thus he has become the Way, and he has invited us to take up our crosses and follow him. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. AMEN.