

Paul writes to the Christians in Rome

The early Christian writer Paul experienced many different types of sufferings himself, including beatings, shipwreck and a long term physical ailment that he called 'a thorn in the flesh'.

Paul communicated with Christians in different locations by letter. The following passage comes from a letter to the Christians at Rome, which Paul probably wrote sometime between AD 55 and 58.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ our Lord.

Romans chapter 8 verses 18, 28 and 38-39 (NRSV)

Put into your own words what Paul said to the Christians in Rome about suffering.

What do you think his purpose was for including this in his letter?

Choose three adjectives to describe how reading this passage might change how Christians feel about any suffering they are going through.

Jesus heals a deaf and mute man

The Gospels contain many accounts in which Jesus heals different types of people, including people with disabilities, people who had leprosy and people who were mentally unwell.

One of these stories about healing is in chapter 7 of Mark's Gospel. Here are the different parts of the story, but after the first sentence the rest has been mixed up.

Rearrange the parts of the story into the correct order.

Then Jesus returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.

And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.

Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.

They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay hands on him.

Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.'

They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'

Mark chapter 7 verses 31-37 (NRSV)

Most Christians believe that these miracle stories are principally about showing that Jesus was the Son of God, but they also see them as showing Jesus' love and compassion for those who are suffering.

How might Jesus' healing miracles influence how Christians think about other people who are experiencing suffering, and any actions they take?

The crucifixion

Perhaps the most important part of the New Testament that deals with the existence of suffering is the story of Jesus' crucifixion.

And when they (the soldiers) had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots, then they sat down there and kept watch over him.

Matthew chapter 27 verses 35-6 (NRSV)

It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him.

Mark chapter 15 verse 25 (NRSV)

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there . . .

Luke chapter 23 verse 33 (NRSV)

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus . . .

John chapter 19 verse 23 (NRSV)

None of the Gospels go into detail about what happened when someone was crucified, because their readers would have known what it involved. Jesus was first beaten, then whipped, and then nailed to a cross and left to die. Crucifixion was a very cruel way to kill someone which involved great physical pain and suffering, leading to a slow death. It was also a humiliating way to die, because it was carried out in public.

Christians believe that Jesus was divine (which means that he was God), and that by dying for the sins of humanity he removed the consequences of human evil. In addition, because Jesus experienced extreme suffering, Christians believe that the crucifixion shows that God is not a distant observer of human suffering. The resurrection of Jesus shows that death and evil can be defeated, and can be seen as an inspiration for Christians who are struggling with difficult situations.

How might belief that Jesus knew what suffering was like help a Christian to deal with their own suffering?