Looking Back at 2019 **[1]**

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2019—what a year! I am sure that many people will agree that the past year has been something spectacular: whether spectacularly glorious or terrible. Mostly I have heard people sound beaten, having suffered hardships and heartache this past year.

Long time readers will know that I have had my fair share of difficult years recently. Throughout it all was God's grace, the future hope of His justice, the remembrance of His mercy, and the eternal joy of Jesus irrespective of circumstance, which sustained me. I am grateful to be able to write that this has been a good year for me. I got married [2] to a wonderful and godly woman [3]. The first half of the year was consumed by wedding planning, and honestly went by at the speed of light.

The second half of the year was settling into marriage: learning to not think of myself, but to consider my wife in everything. It involved welcoming her into what had previously been my space, and adjusting and accommodating to much change. It has been good and, again, it is only God's grace which has sustained us so well for the past six months.

Good times included spending time with special friends. Particularly precious for me was the honour of being the master of ceremony for good friends at two weddings. It has been good being welcomed into a new family. Work has been stable and allowed me a degree of freedom to explore and grow. My wife and I sought out, and joined a new church: in the process, we met, and were encouraged by, so many faithful friends and servants of Christ from various church communities (of different denominations).

There were personal challenges as well. Barely three months after gaining a grandparent again, we lost her. My wife and I have also been dealing with our own, respective health issues. And certain relationships continue to be difficult.

Despite having already written four paragraphs about my year, my intention is not actually to focus on myself. What has been incredibly difficult this year, has been hearing about and seeing friends suffer. Death in families (both suddenly and protracted); supporting families through cancer treatment (although, thankfully, there were healings); family strife; financial instability and shortfalls; doubts and unstable faith; the realities of unfaithfulness and divorce; near-fatal accidents; diagnoses of chronic illnesses; the loss of children; and others still who continue through their years long struggles.

The problem of pain and suffering [4] perhaps remains the leading reason why people do not believe in God. It is no trivial matter, and I am not going to attempt to address it comprehensively here. I do just want to mention that the Bible is not deaf on the matter of suffering. Many of the psalms express their writers' anguish. They teach us not to shirk away in difficult and doubting times, but to actually bring them before God. In the book of Lamentations [5], the author writes about their experience of God's wrath through judgement, as well as a loss of security, but not a loss of ultimate,

eternal hope. The book of Job [6] is all about unjust suffering. The book of Ecclesiastes [7] addresses nothing less than the apparent meaninglessness of life. None of these “solve” the problem of suffering, but they give the reader much to think about, and encourage the reader to continue in faith. By this I do not mean a blind faith, but a view of reality which balances the pain of today with the joys of yesterday and the unrevealed prospects of tomorrow: to understand that the world is broken and fallen, but was created good; that we do not serve ourselves, but God. The ultimate expression of this service is trust, obedience, and being in service of other people (Matthew 22:34–40).

Then there is also, of course, the example of Jesus, who came into this world precisely to suffer unjustly, so that He—as God—could partake in our pain and suffering as a human, as well to be able to dwell with humanity forever. God is not an abstract entity far removed from us, but came into a world of injustice so that He could demonstrate His closeness and association with us. That is why Jesus is called Immanuel: “God *with* us” (Matthew 1:22–23). Ultimately, Jesus's victory over death could restore our relationship with and perspective of God (1 Peter 3:18).

If you are wrestling with suffering, I want to urge you to consider the richness of the Bible [8].

There are two things which I want to ask. The first is that you not keep your difficulties, or even your joys, to yourself. If you have had a difficult year, share it with others who can support you, whether through encouragement, physical means or prayer [9]. If you do not have anyone whom you feel you can trust like that, then please feel free to make contact with me. And if you have had a good year, share that news with others in a kind and gentle manner: tell others a message of hope and joy. If you have the physical and emotional capacity, assist the friends and family members, without seeking any gain for yourself.

The second is to call out to God. Praise His name in joy, and sorrow *in* and *with* Him in your pain and loneliness. God hears and is not unsympathetic.

May we step into 2020 with an eternal hope not based on present circumstances, but knowing that the God who met us in the person of Jesus, is with us in our joys and sorrows, as is clearly portrayed in Scriptures and through the testimonies of many.

God be with you into 2020!

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