

### 13. Why so many crises – floods, the coach crash and the shootings?

#### Hebrews 12:7-11

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

John Newton, the author of *Amazing Grace*, had a colourful past. That's putting it mildly. He had some Christianity in his background, from his mum. She died when he was a boy, and gradually he turned away from God.

His life became a roller coaster of disasters. He fell passionately in love with Polly Catlett, deserting the navy to be with her. He was caught, flogged and demoted.

He got caught up in the slave trade, living a life of appalling debauchery. He was enslaved for a while himself. Through all his troubles, he never cried out to God.

Then on the night of 10<sup>th</sup> March 1748 his ship, rotten from months sailing in the tropics, was caught in a violent storm. He was convinced he was going to die. A chance remark from another sailor suddenly broke through into Newton's mind. His past came rushing back to him. There was a God, the one whom he might meet any minute, and nothing could be more important than to know this God's forgiveness.

The writer C.S. Lewis called suffering, "God's megaphone to a deaf world", because very often it is suffering that alerts people to God. Suffering breaks the illusion that we are in control, and forces us to acknowledge God.

Not only does suffering bring many people to God in the first place. It also helps established believers to grow in their faith, as they trust God more and more. That's the way Hebrews 12 teaches Christians to view every kind of hardship they face. It is discipline.

Discipline is not punishment. Punishment is a matter of justice and belongs in the law court. Discipline is a matter of growth and it belongs in the family. Discipline is a gift of love.

To the unbelieving world, suffering is a microphone. To believers it is discipline.

By the way, I'm not saying that this fully explains or justifies suffering. I'm not suggesting that God has allowed West Cumbria to suffer three consecutive tragedies only for the sake of our growth. But our growth must be part of the reason.

If we are willing we can receive what has happened as an impetus to grow, either from unbelief to faith or into greater Christian maturity. Perhaps John Newton's catalogue of disasters and their amazing outcome might be a parable of transformation for West Cumbria.