

The Sweetness of Suffering – Part 1

One of my favourite stories as a child was *The Emperor's New Clothes*. In that tale, a pair of deceitful men trick a king into believing they have woven him a new set of clothes with magical invisible thread. Only the intelligent can see the thread, while the foolish will not be able to see it.

Of course, there is no thread at all, but all the proud people in the kingdom, including the king himself, pretend they can see this imaginary thread, so as to appear smart. It takes a child to point out that the king is actually wearing nothing but his underclothes.

A similar situation is happening in some sectors of Christianity. Some deceivers have told the church that there is this magical invisible thread called a trouble-free life. You can be a Christian and have no problems whatsoever: you can be healthy all the time, you can be wealthy all the time, you can wear this special garment called 'never-suffer'.

Of course, say the deceivers, only those with the eyes of faith can see it. Only those who confess their positive thinking can enjoy this special thread. Everyone else won't see it or experience it.

And just like the crowd pretending to admire the parading king in his underclothes, all too many Christians pretend they too can see and are experiencing this trouble-free life. They don't want to be said to be lacking in faith, so they quickly adopt the same attitude as everyone else: "Yes, I too, am prospering – no problems, I'm a child of the king!"

Of course, everyone can see that this thread is invisible, but no one wants to admit what a child can see – you do have problems, you do have health issues, you do have financial struggles, you do – put simply, suffer.

Suffering – it is given such a prominent place in Scripture, that it's sad people buy into the deceitful theology that says Christians are not meant to suffer. An entire book of the Bible is devoted to this one subject – suffering – that's the book of Job.

The tragedy of the 'health-wealth-and-I-never-suffer' gospel is this: not only does it lead people into deep doubt and disillusionment as they look within and see much suffering, but continue to pretend outwardly, it also robs Christians of the greatest faith-building tool in their life – responding correctly to suffering.

It robs Christians, strange as it might sound, of the deepest joys, of the highest pleasures, of the most wonderful spiritual mountaintops possible, by denying the existence of suffering in their lives.

We don't want be that way. We want to be as a little child, and accept and believe that suffering is part of God's sovereign plan for us. Suffering is not a result of a lack of faith –

it sometimes is the opposite. Sometimes, the greater your faith, the more God entrusts you with suffering to prune and produce more fruit for Him.

We want to take a good, thorough look at the topic of suffering throughout Scripture. We want to see the who, what, when, how and why of suffering. What is suffering? Who will suffer? When will they suffer? Why will they suffer? And probably the most important question of all, yet the one most infrequently asked, how must they suffer?

By the time we are finished, we will see something remarkable. Suffering has a sweet aftertaste. It is bitter on the surface, or else it would not be suffering, but it is overwhelmingly sweet, nourishing and helpful to our souls. While a look at suffering might make one nervous to begin with, the truth is, we are all already well-acquainted with suffering.

Problems, pains, difficulties, tragedies, loss and hurts follow us in different degrees all our lives. We can either pretend they are not there, like the people who pretended to see what they could not on the emperor, or we can drink in the Bible's full and flowing wisdom on how to face and react to suffering.

What is suffering?

When can we say that a human is suffering? There are so many different possibilities of what constitutes suffering, since human experience is so incredibly vast and diverse. I have heard a useful definition of suffering which perhaps sums up almost every angle: suffering is when you have something you don't want, and when you don't have something that you do want.

If there is something I do not want in my life, and I have it – from disease to someone's death, to dishonour to depression – it's a form of suffering. On the other hand, if there is something I want, and it is denied me – be it health, or more food, or friendship, or freedom, and I do not have it – I am suffering.

That's a very broad definition. It does not comment on the state of heart of the person suffering. Because we can immediately see that who I am will affect what I want and don't want, and therefore affect my state of suffering. The man who lusts after money feels he is suffering when he doesn't have it. It is in fact his own sinful lust that is causing him to suffer.

So not having the things you want or having things you don't want is going to be critically affected by what your heart does and does not want – which in turn is critically affected by your relationship to Christ. It's already obvious that spiritual maturity is going to affect how you go through suffering.

Who will bear the brunt of suffering?

Is suffering for some? Isn't it only for sinners? No, the Bible is clear that all people will suffer. In a sin-cursed world, suffering is as inevitable as death itself. Nor are Christians exempt from suffering simply because we are saved. Let's examine some Bible texts to flatten the myth that Christians don't have to suffer.

- **1 Peter 2:21:** *"For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps."* If a Christian is a Christ-follower – then Peter insists that the road He trod is one we must as well – that of suffering.
- **Acts 14:22:** *"Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God."* The difference between the first century church and the twenty-first century church is that in their church they encouraged each other by stating the facts about suffering. In modern churches, we seek to encourage each other by omitting the facts about suffering.
- **Luke 10:3:** *"Go your ways: behold, I send you forth as lambs among wolves."* What picture comes to mind as you imagine a baby lamb walking toward a pack of ravenous, vicious wolves? Do you see the wolves playing with the lamb? Gently nudging it along to help it? Ignoring it? No – the imagery is of real and terrible torture.
- **John 15:20:** *"Remember the word that I said unto you, 'The servant is not greater than his lord.' If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also."* To put it simply, Christ is saying – if I am the Lord, and I have to suffer – how great do you think you are if you think you will escape suffering? You'd have to be greater than Christ to escape suffering. Since Christ suffering was part of God's plan, and since there is no one greater than Christ, Jesus is stating the inevitability of suffering.
- **Philippians 1:29** is an amazing verse: *"For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake."* Put simply, that Scripture links suffering to salvation. It says that not only was salvation given to you, but suffering as well. It is as if Paul is regarding suffering as simply part of the gift of salvation. You were given salvation, and you were also given suffering. It might not sound like the kind of gift we want, but as we will see, there are plenty reasons to regard suffering as a gift.
- Finally, **2 Timothy 3:12** clinches it: *"Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."* It does not say that all that live godly may or might suffer persecution. It says all that live godly in Christ Jesus *shall* suffer persecution. Not does it say, *"Yea, and some that live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."* It says *"all."* The use of *"all"* and *"shall"* make this a universal imperative. No true Christian will escape it. It applies to everyone, and it is absolutely certain.

When will suffering happen?

We go to 1 Peter for our answer:

- **1 Peter 2:20:** *"For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? But if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God."*
- **1 Peter 4:15-16:** *"But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf."*

In other words, the Bible is saying suffering really happens in two circumstances – suffering brought about by our own sin, and suffering brought about by our sanctification. There will be suffering due to our own sinful desires and their consequences, and there will be suffering brought about by God's child-training – as He seeks to conform us to the image of Christ.

Sometimes, we will have things we don't want, and lack things we do want, because of sin. This may be the evil consequences of sinful attitudes, desires, ways of speaking, ambitions, priorities. The very state of our heart when we are given over to the flesh is asking for suffering – because we will want things that God will deny us, and we will have things which we didn't realise were the consequences of our sin.

Proverbs 27:20 says, *"Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied."* So, it's a foregone conclusion that sin brings the bulk of suffering. *"The way of the transgressor is hard"* says **Proverbs 13:15**. His sin is a load on his back which is too much to carry, but which he refuses to drop. Indeed, the worst suffering of all, the agony of hell, is the result of sin that is not forgiven through the available mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

But, if we didn't know otherwise, we'd think that the solution then is to seek to sin less, and therefore we will suffer less. If sin brings suffering, then the less we sin, the less we suffer, right?

Well, unfortunately it is not quite as simple as that. It's certainly true that the less we sin, the less we suffer as a result of sin. The less we have of sinful lusts tormenting us, the better. The less consequences we reap, the better. It is obvious that holiness will bring a much more satisfying, fulfilled life.

The Bible is clear that righteousness is its own reward. But even if we were to eliminate all suffering as a result of our or someone else's sin, the Bible still insists that suffering will be a part of our lives. Suffering, as we'll see, is sometimes the tool God most needs to cause spiritual growth in an earth-bound, sight-walking, prone-to-unbelief people. God will use suffering to sanctify us.

So, we might reason that we ought to not try to be sanctified, so we can suffer less. But this is foolish. No one on earth is more miserable than the lukewarm Christian. So, do evil, and you will suffer. Do good, and you will suffer. We can say suffering is sin-caused, and sovereignly-caused. There is no special formula to escape this fact.

In Adam, we all made a choice to choose sin over God, and now suffering is part of our lives. D

In short, as Christians, we must not seek to try to do something *about* our suffering, we should try to do something *with* our suffering. We should seek to use it as God intends it – a loving choice to cause our maturity.

Why do we suffer?

What we don't realise is that the entire book of Job is written to teach us that the question of why we suffer is not nearly as important to God as the question of how we suffer. Many of the reasons why we suffer we will never know on this side of heaven. Many of the explanations for tragedies and calamities and terrible things will not be given before we stand before God Himself.

Our problem is that we think that the knowledge of why we are suffering will somehow alleviate the suffering itself. We think that if we have more knowledge, we will have more comfort. But the truth of the matter is, knowing why you are suffering will not truly affect your ability to be Christlike in that suffering.

Job, for instance, was never told why he lost all his children, and his health, and his reputation, and his possessions. God never explained to Job that he was the centre of a dispute between God and Satan, that he was a spiritual experiment to test if God's people serve him for nothing more than what they can get out of it, or if God Himself was their treasure.

Nothing in the book of Job has God telling Job the reasons behind his suffering. Instead, we have God revealing His glory to Job, and teaching him lessons on how to respond to suffering. God wanted an eternal result in Job – a reaction of humility, trust and worship.

Job could well have found out what was going on, and continued in his bitterness and murmuring. Information alone does not sanctify us. It can have the opposite results. So knowing why we suffer is not the most important question. But nevertheless, God, in His mercy, gives us some of the reasons why we encounter and experience suffering.

Reasons we suffer: 1. To produce endurance

The first reason we'll look at is given explicitly by James in his epistle.

My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.

James 1:2-3

The word patience here means endurance. Suffering produces endurance. Endurance can be simply defined as continual obedience under pressure. Manufacturing has many illustrations of products that are heated up to high temperatures in the manufacturing process to strengthen them. This process hardens them, purifies them and gives them more durability. God does the same with suffering in our lives.

As much as sinners boast about their strength, ability and power, the truth is that sin has done nothing but weaken us. It has weakened our resolve to do right. It has filled us with laziness and a love of ease. It has made us fearful, cowardly, and self-protective. It has made us selfish, small-minded and mean-spirited.

This is not exactly the kind of material you want to work with if you are intent on reflecting the majestic King of Kings. We are not nearly strong enough to be able to handle the responsibilities and pressures of representing the king and fighting for His kingdom.

It's obvious that if God is going to mould this clay into something of a resemblance to His Son, there will have to be some painful blows to chip off the unsightly blobs of sinfulness. There will have to be some extreme heat to purge out the dross from us. There will have to be some deep cuts to remove the ingrained sin in our lives. There will have to be a process that produces endurance in us.

We tend to think that the Christian life, and spiritual growth in particular, ought to be a clean, smooth and altogether simple process. When we think that way, we vastly underestimate our sinful nature. We do not realise how tightly we grip our own rights, our own ambitions, our own name, our own way.

We do not realise how in love we are with this world and its promises. We do not realise how naturally we gravitate toward self-rule, toward walking by sight, toward walking in the flesh. We do not realise how much of the world is inside our very souls. For that reason, God must use the scalpel of suffering to carry out His spiritual surgery.

Often, the Word we hear preached or read seems faraway, almost impractical to us. However, when God turns up the heat, suddenly the lessons we learnt mentally come to life. The implanted seed of the Word suddenly germinates in the greenhouse of suffering. The struggle against sin and self becomes a reality. It is as if life without suffering tends to lead us to spiritual stagnation.

You see this in the history of Israel in the book of Judges. When things went well, their comfort produced a self-satisfied unbelief. God would then bring about the suffering of oppression and defeat by the surrounding Canaanites. In the midst of their suffering, they would cry out to God, their faith was re-kindled, and they once again trusted Him. He would deliver them, and pretty soon, the cycle began all over again.

Comfort, ease, and a life without any suffering tends to work in opposition to spiritual growth. The plant of faith seems to thrive most in the soil of suffering. And so God

brings about suffering. Handling our suffering with God's grace enlarges our hearts, our will, our determination, our trust. It builds spiritual muscle. God needs to do this to produce endurance in us. Consider what Paul says:

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.

Romans 5:1-5

Paul says that tribulations, or suffering, produces that patience – that endurance. The endurance produces experience. The word experience means proof – it means we've been tested and have passed. Such a sense of knowing we are His and are growing produces additional confidence – hope in God. This hope never disappoints us – because in this very confidence we experience the love of God.

In short, you need endurance to push further into your love relationship with God. Peter certainly links endurance to a love for God and others in **2 Peter 1:5-7**: *"And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, charity."*

After we have endurance, we can add godliness. Endurance is the ability to keep obeying. It is the virtue of obeying even under pressure. It is the practice of making obedience a habit, not an exception.

You need to be able to handle more than you can now to know, obey and serve Him better. We don't often realise that our hearts are naturally small, closed up and shrivelled by sin. We have lost much of our capacity to truly feel, and enjoy God. It was for this reason that the Psalmist prayed in **Psalms 119:32**: *"I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart."*

See, God wants to bless us! But what we don't realise is the greatest blessings are for those who can handle them. In other words, the highest pleasures are for the most mature. Children cannot enjoy some of life's most rewarding and exciting pleasures, simply because God made those pleasures to be enjoyed by the physically and mentally mature.

But growing into that place of physical and mental maturity includes an ever-increasing amount of responsibility. The more responsibility, the more endurance you need to handle it. The same is true spiritually. Deep and abiding experience of God comes from those who are deeply acquainted with Him.

Endurance is what God seeks to create in us, so that we won't crack under the strain of God increasing the spiritual responsibility in our lives. It is as if we are a metal vessel. God wants us to be able to hold increasing amounts of the water of Himself. But as we are, we cannot handle anymore. So God must heat up the furnace of our lives through suffering.

Then as we are pliable, He enlarges and strengthen us – so that we now have the ability to know and handle more of who God is. The processes of suffering are painful, but the reward of increased endurance to handle more far outstrips the pain. **1 Peter 5:10** puts it this way: *“But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you.”*

The idea of suffering along these lines is to create stronger, more mature, more stable, more durable believers. Of the many things Job learned, it was that suffering will produce at least this effect: *“But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10).*

To put it simply, when God was finished with Job, Job was more able to apprehend God than before. He had a deepened knowledge and understanding of God. You could say, his vessel had been expanded to where he could retain more of God.

So we have seen that suffering is having things you don't want or lacking things you do. As such, a lot of suffering is related to the state of our heart. We've seen suffering comes as a result of sin, and in the process of sanctification. No one is exempt from it. And we've just begun with a list of the reasons we suffer – the first of which is to cause endurance.

In Part 2 of this series, we'll continue to look at the pattern in our pain and more of the reasons we suffer, before we move on to the most important thing of all – how to suffer.