

The Sweetness of Suffering – Part 2

The topic of suffering is not something we like to look at. We naturally shy away from suffering. But as we have seen, suffering is actually something positive in the life of a believer. God uses it to tremendous affect. We've seen already that God uses suffering to produce endurance in us. We're continuing to look at the Biblical reasons for suffering.

Reasons we suffer: 2. To increase our faith

The next reason why the Bible says we suffer is to increase our faith, our desire for heaven, our eternal perspective, and our focus on spiritual things. You see, we are very earth-bound people. Left to ourselves, as long as things are fine, all we focus on is the here and now. We get our roots down deep, and make this our home. Suffering is the loving tool of the Father to remind us of what to truly live for.

The best thing you could do for someone is to direct them to what really matters. An unloving thing to do would be to allow someone to waste their lives.

God knows what really matters. He knows that the eternal rewards of heaven far exceed and outshine the highest pleasure here on earth. He knows the quality of our experience in heaven is of a far greater priority than our earthly comfort. God is lovingly committed to what will bring us the greatest joy and benefit. These things are all eternal.

The eternal perspective does not come naturally to the children of earth. We live for the here and now. We worry about, think about, live for, hope in, work towards earthly gain. How can God stop this momentum, and cause us to live for another world, another time, for another goal? By the use of suffering.

Suffering is when God causes us to see the ultimate futility of what we are living for. He causes the things we are chasing after to have a bitter taste, a shallow feel, a depressingly unsatisfying glow about them. Our financial empire collapses. Relationships turn sour. Our bodies become sick. We lose prestige and honour. We lose earthly possessions. We are unable to obtain a particular goal. Through it, God shows us that nothing less than God Himself is a worthy pursuit.

Think of Israel for a moment. During and shortly after the time of Joseph, they were prospering in the land of Egypt. Their flocks were doing well. As a people, they now numbered in the millions. Yet God had promised Abraham the physical land of Canaan. Why would a people quite content where they were ever want to move on to another land where they would have to fight for it and start all over again?

The Israelites would state their desire to stay in Egypt – things were fine, after all. For that reason, God brought about their slavery and harsh treatment at the hand of the Egyptians. They began to suffer in Egypt. Only then, as their former comforts

disappeared, could they see the sense and reason for wanting to go to another country. Only then would they truly experience God in the exodus, and grow into a love relationship with Him by faith.

In the same way, Christians belong to another country. We are already citizens of heaven according to **Philippians 3:20**. That does not mean we do not live our lives to the full here, it means that we are to recognise that we are passing through. We are to make our desires heavenly. God is to be the invisible reason for why we act the way we do in and among the visible. As Paul and Christ say:

Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.

Colossians 3:2-4

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal.

Matthew 6:19-20

But this mindset is not automatic to people who tend to set their affections on things on earth, and lay up treasures for themselves here. So God essentially throws the car of our lives into reverse, and the resulting backfire of suffering wakes us up to the fact that we are living and hoping in the wrong things. Hebrews speaks on realising what really matters:

Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Wherefore we, receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.

Hebrews 12:26-28

This passage speaks of a day when God will so judge the world that the only things that will remain will be the things that matter – the things that cannot be shaken. If we live for something that will not survive that judgment – we are wasting our lives. As the saying goes, “Only one life to live, it will soon be past, only what’s done for Christ will last.”

How foolish will we look after that day when God shakes all creation, and we see that what we worked for – a big bank account, a fine reputation, a comfortable life with many possessions, many admirable achievements, much fame, much pleasure, are all incinerated in a moment. An entire life’s focus – consumed in a moment.

If we do not live for what matters – for what cannot be shaken, we are wasting our lives.

God, in His love, applies suffering to show us that living for things that will not outlast that day is a tragic waste of a precious life. The book of Ecclesiastes is essentially written to show that life without God is a vapour.

Solomon shows that all the things he tried apart from God were meaningless, as permanent and as meaningful as a vapour. He mentions achieving great things, having great wealth, having a beautiful house, enjoying the best of human entertainment, gaining a great reputation, accumulating wisdom as an end in itself, and even having righteousness as an end in itself.

All of these things – Solomon found that they were meaningless. In terms of simply the earthly scheme of things – they did not profit. There was no real difference between the rich and the poor, the wise and the fool, the evil and the good. Without an eternal element factored into human life – it is nothing but vanity.

But Solomon knew and taught that only an eternal perspective makes any thing in life meaningful. God adds weight to life.

I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Ecclesiastes 3:10-11

In **Ecclesiastes 2:25** comes the blunt question: “For apart from Him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?”

God puts eternity in men’s heart. How does He do this? Partially through an innate God-given conscience. But also through suffering. The injustice, the oppression, the frustrating cycles of life will either lead one to believe there is no God, or there has to be a God. You will either see suffering and believe life is totally pointless, or you will see it and believe there must be a chapter yet to be written that will sort all this out.

There has to be another world, another place, where all that has happened here is sorted out and makes sense. This is much of the point of Hebrews 11, and the heroes of faith. The writer insists that they did not always physically see the fruit of their labour, they did not always see the fulfilment of the promises. The fact that they kept believing in them is concrete proof that they were living for something beyond this life:

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

Hebrews 11:13-16

Paul makes a very obvious and good point in Romans 8:

For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us... For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.

Romans 8:18, 24-23

If we could see all that were hoping for, it would no longer be hope. But the very fact that we continue to live and work for something we will not see in this life is testament to our true focus. Notice Paul encourages us that the suffering of this time cannot be compared to the glory that we will see. As the hymn goes, *"It will be worth it all, when we see Jesus."*

Indeed, I often speculate that heaven will be sweetest for those that have suffered most for Christ. What a huge contrast, what an appetite is created for the glories of heaven, when earth just becomes tiresome, burdensome and unsatisfying. God is most glorified, when believers state they would frankly rather just be with Him. That was Paul's statement, was it not?

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better.

Philippians 1:21-23

For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

The thought of heaven, the thought of standing before Christ to be judged, the thought of rewards – this is reality, not a fairy tale. And the only thing which shocks us into living for what really matters is when God moves in and twists up our earthly dreams and hopes. Going back to the supreme book of suffering, Job understood this as well. He knew that even if his earthly suffering did not make sense to him – there was far more to the situation:

For I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me.

Job 19:25-27

God lovingly steps in to save us from ourselves. He saves us from wasting our lives on what does not matter, to focus us on what really does – the eternal. Perhaps we can sum up this reason for suffering like Peter did – it deepens our faith. It causes us to regard God and His existence as the pressing reality of life.

Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls.

1 Peter 1:6-7

Faith is the exchange between our souls and God. It is the lifeblood upon which our spiritual souls exist. Whatever God has to do to grow and stimulate this faith that will believe that God is, and is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him – He will do. There are only two choices to make: walk by sight, or walk by faith.

Reasons we suffer: 3. To discipline us

And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons:

"My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord,

Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him;

For whom the Lord loves He chastens,

And scourges every son whom He receives."

If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Hebrews 12:5-11

The next reason God uses suffering in our lives is to straighten us out. He uses different forms of suffering to discipline us. The question is often asked, 'How do we know if someone is being disciplined by God for their sin, or being tested?' The answer, simply put, is: 'None of your business.'

The entire book of Job deals with this topic. Four men sat next to Job, insisting that his suffering was due to his sin. In fact we know it was the opposite – it was due to his righteousness. Job teaches us to avoid making the call as to why someone is suffering,

and leave it to God to reveal that in His time. As Jesus said to Peter when he asked about John, *"What is that to thee? Follow thou me!"* (John 21:22).

So we cannot know why someone else is suffering. A better question is, 'How do I know if the suffering I am going through is discipline for my sin, or simply testing?' Well, remember God's discipline is not so much punitive as it is corrective. Therefore, there will not be such a vast difference between the suffering he uses to grow your faith, and the suffering he uses to stop you from sinning. The result is the same – sanctification.

Sometimes God will use the consequences of a sin to discipline us – because the very pain it brings will train us to avoid it in the future. Sometimes he uses suffering in other areas which causes us to do self-examination – take stock of our lives, and start to do the necessary confession and repentance.

Remember, not all God's child-training is negative – most of it is positive. Like with any good parent, painful discipline only results from rebellion – continual, wilful disobedience. Most often, God instructs, then explains how, then supervises, and corrects when we are going wrong.

You could possibly say that God trained Job to get a more correct view of Him. Maybe Job thought he could control God by presenting sacrifices every day for his children. God trained Job to treat God as sovereign. But that discipline was never done out of an angry, mean heart. It was the heart that was so proud of Job that He boasted about him to Satan.

It is a wrong view of God that sees God as standing over us with a cosmic cane, ready to cause His divine frown to increase into an angry glare that will eventually lash out at us. When we think that way, we are transposing our view of earthly, sinful men, even perhaps our own parents, on God.

As far as believers go, God's true wrath was poured out upon Jesus. Post-cross, God's heart toward us is not undecided. It is not moody or temperamental. Consider this passage:

What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.

Romans 8:31-34

God will not punish believers now for their sins – He will train them as His children to sin less and obey more. A profound thought is to realise that nothing you can do can make God love you less. He loves you in Christ as much as He ever will, and nothing can change that. That is not a license to sin, it is simply the perfect love of God.

For that matter, nothing you do can make Him love you more. Not all the obedience in the world will make God love you more, because His love for you will not grow or decrease – it is already perfect. So what is the point? When God then uses suffering to discipline us, it is not to get back at us, to punish us, to even out the scales. It is from a heart of love. I can't put it better than A.W. Tozer did in his article '*God is easy to live with.*' He wrote:

Unfortunately, many Christians cannot get free from their perverted notions of God, and these notions poison their hearts and destroy their inward freedom. These friends serve God grimly, as the elder brother did, doing what is right without enthusiasm and without joy, and seem altogether unable to understand the buoyant, spirited celebration when the prodigal comes home. Their idea of God rules out the possibility of His being happy in His people, and they attribute the singing and shouting to sheer fanaticism. Unhappy souls, these, doomed to go heavily on their melancholy way, grimly determined to do right if the heavens fall and to be in the winning side in the day of judgment. How good it would be if we could learn that God is easy to live with. He remembers our frame and knows that we are dust. He may sometimes chasten us, it is true, but even this He does with a smile, the proud, tender smile of a Father who is bursting with pleasure over an imperfect but promising son who is coming every day to look more and more like the One whose child he is.

That is why every passage on God's discipline assures us it is His love that does it. The portion we just read assures us that a lack of discipline would be the negative thing – for it would show we were not related to the concerned and loving Father God. Jesus repeats this in **Revelation 3:19**: "*As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.*"

As the writer of Hebrews tells us: "*For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it*" (**Hebrews 12:11**). Suffering does not seem pleasant at the time, but the results it brings are always good.

Anyone who had godly, dedicated parents looks back on the discipline they received as a useful, helpful thing. **Proverbs 22:15** says: "*Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.*" And the same could be said of us in general. Foolishness, rebellion, fleshliness, hardness of heart, unbelief, pride and laziness are bound in our hearts. It takes the loving rod of God to drive them from us.

Thus far, we have seen three reasons for suffering – and all of them are good. To produce endurance. To grow our faith. To correct us and train us to obey more. This thing we fear so much – suffering – is clearly a tool that wisely used by our Father. Suffering is not there to harm us ultimately, but to help us. Lamentations assures us:

For the Lord will not cast off for ever: But though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies. For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men.

Lamentations 3:31-33

God may break the leg of the wandering lamb. But He immediately binds up the broken leg, and carries the lamb. The pain is harsh, but the result is good – the lamb will not go where he will be harmed. As the hymn '*How Firm a Foundation*' puts it:

*When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.*