

## **The Sweetness of Suffering – Part 4**

Imagine this situation. You're one of the most respected, wealthy men of your day. Your influence is felt far and wide. When you walk into a room, people acknowledge your presence and go silent. Your personal fortune is well known by everyone. Then one day, a day like any other, in comes a frantic messenger stating that a huge earthquake has completely destroyed your entire business enterprise – there is nothing left, and the insurance company will not pay out.

As he is finished speaking, in rushes another one and says, the bank has frozen your account, and is repossessing assets to cover the debts you will have. As you're reeling from this catastrophe, in rushes another messenger and says, "All your children were in one car, and were in a massive car accident, they all died instantly." The bottom of your life has just fallen out.

However, as if that isn't enough, your body begins to break out in the biggest, most painful and unimaginably unsightly sores and boils. The infection is so bad that a stench follows you and you have to leave home and sleep outside. As if that isn't enough, your spouse comes to you and says, why don't you just take a gun and end it all? Why on earth do you continue to live?

That's a 21st century version of what happened to the man Job. Job became God's ultimate object lesson on suffering. Pretty soon, three men, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar arrive, and a fourth younger man, Elihu. These are Job's 'comforters'. But as Job will say to them later – 'miserable comforters are ye all', because their idea of comforting Job is to explain to him that this is all his fault.

For around 35 chapters, Job has to fight off the incessant accusation that he is hiding secret sin in his life, and this has come upon him for that reason. In the process, Job's suffering turns to bitterness, and he begins to throw a lot of things in God's face. The end of Job, where God speaks, are perhaps the most beautiful and powerful chapters in all of Scripture.

Here, God displays His glory to Job through a series of questions, and essentially makes the point: 'I am all you need, Job. All your questions find their answer, or lack of answer, in my wisdom. All your circumstances find their reason in my sovereignty. All the things of your life are being held together by me.'

'Since you do not understand even the most basic things of my creation, how do you expect to understand how I am working with the crown of my creation – man? Stop asking why, trust me, and focus on how to respond.'

And that is perhaps the strongest lesson of the book of Job – that the why of suffering is not nearly as important as the how of suffering. Having a correct view of God and

responding to that is ten thousand times more important than knowing the exact reasons why your suffering is occurring.

Job was never given an explanation of why these things happened to Him. We are told – so that we see both sides – the heavenly perspective, and the earthly. But Job was never told. And God's point to us is that, yes there is a reason – but you knowing that reason is not going to solve the problem. What will glorify me, says the Lord, is if you know who I am, and respond correctly in your suffering. This is the main point.

In this series so far, we've been exploring some biblical reasons why we suffer. We saw it is to produce endurance. It is to grow our faith and hope in God and things eternal. It is to discipline us, train us to sin less and obey more. It is to inspire others to love and serve God. It is to humble us and make us more effective for God. And most of all, it is to make us Christ-centred and cross-centred.

These are six reasons why suffering is necessary to produce the final fruit of resembling Jesus Christ. But the interesting thing is this: the Bible spends far more time teaching us how to suffer than it does in teaching us why we suffer. Like Job, knowing all the reasons behind our affliction will not make us more holy.

Mere information, mere data, mere facts, do not sanctify. It is the illuminated knowledge of God's character, that when meditated on, causes change. So God does not want you to know why you are suffering so much as He wants you to react correctly in the midst of it.

In fact, it is our reactions in suffering that make the whole exercise one of growth or one of hardening. The same hot water that hardens an egg softens a potato. Our reaction, the how of suffering, will turn out to be the very thing that causes us to grow spiritually, or to stay where we are.

Israel's reaction to their trials is an example of unbelief that caused a wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. David's reaction to the trial of Goliath is an example of how facing it in God – the how – brought great victory and spiritual growth.

Indeed, sometimes the reason why suffering is prolonged in the life of a believer is when we just won't learn the intended lesson. It is when we remain in rebellion, in stubbornness, in a stiff-necked, selfish, unbelieving spirit, that God will keep putting us back into that same furnace until we change.

All too many Christians ask, "Why, God? *Why* is this happening to me?" If only they would ask, "How, God? *How* do you want me to respond? What is the character trait you are trying to teach me in this?" I honestly believe that the Father, who does not willingly afflict or grieve us, will not keep us in the crucible of suffering a second longer than we need to be.

Responding correctly to God in the situation is most often what He is looking for. God seldom takes His children out of the storm; He usually takes them through it. The key is to see that we ought to act, not react. If we simply react to suffering, it will be the normal, painful complaining of the world. But instead of reacting to suffering, we must choose to act. We must act in a Christlike way, and this is the most important thing of all. What will that look like? The Bible tells us in four negatives:

## 1. Without revenge

*Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.*

**Romans 12:19-21**

*Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not.*

**Romans 12:14**

*For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.*

**1 Peter 2:21-25**

As we suffer, we are not to take revenge on those who cause it. Christ, when he was reviled, did not return the same. Christlike suffering is to leave the justice of the situation to God. As **1 Peter 4:19** puts it: *"Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator."* If we return evil for evil, we walk out of the path of imitating Christ.

## 2. Without murmuring

*Do all things without murmurings and disputings: that ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world.*

**Philippians 2:14-18**

When we begin to murmur and complain, what we are really doing is questioning the wisdom and sovereignty of God. We are exalting ourselves to a place where we believe we deserve better, and expecting God to make life work according to our every whim and pleasure.

To go through suffering without murmuring or complaining is a great step toward the submission so vital to Christian growth. By biting our lips, and indeed, confessing it in our hearts, we must seek gratitude, not grumbling. This is a crucial 'how' of suffering.

### **3. Without bewilderment or shame**

*Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. 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.*

**1 Peter 4:12-13**

Peter says, don't be shocked or amazed. Don't keep repeating, 'I can't believe this is happening to me!' because then you act like God is not in control – or that He is, but doesn't know what He is doing. Also, don't be ashamed. If you wear your righteous suffering like it is something you are sinfully guilty of, you miss the point.

*For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.*

**2 Timothy 1:12**

Paul says, I am indeed guilty of believing in Jesus. But I am glad to be found guilty of such a thing – because I know who it is I am believing in. I will wear my suffering as a badge – something that says 'like Christ' – suffering righteously. Just like my Master.

### **4. Without discouragement or turning back**

*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 4:16-17**

Paul points out that suffering should not weather you spiritually. As you suffer, you realise that the more the physical and temporal seem to be wasting away, the more the spiritual and eternal are building and growing. Therefore to be discouraged, to lose heart, is to give up in the very midst of being made stronger. The writer of Hebrews wrote to them in the same light:

*Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: For yet a little while, And He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; But if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.*

**Hebrews 10:35-38**

*Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.*

**Hebrews 12:1-3**

So we are to go through our sufferings without revenge, without murmuring, without bewilderment or shame, and without discouragement and turning back. Instead of those things, the Bible instructs us how to face suffering with four positives:

## **1. With patience**

Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.

James 5:10-11

Earlier in this series we saw that suffering works patience and endurance. But the obvious thing is that we are to apply ourselves to this very thing. Job had much patience with his sufferings. Though he lost one thing after another, he allowed God to produce patience in him, so he could say, *"The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord"* (**Job 1:21**).

Later, the length of the trial began to stretch Job, and he lost patience. In the midst of suffering we need to remember God's promise in **1 Corinthians 10:13**: *"There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it."*

The fact that we know God is not arbitrarily tormenting us, but is applying the scalpel of suffering for a specific purpose according to a specific timetable, encourages us to be patient and long-suffering. *"But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing"* (**James 1:4**).

The Bible also encourages us that there is a way of escape – suffering is not for always, there is an end: *“For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning”* (**Psalms 30:5**).

## 2. With hope and trust

*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**

In our suffering, the response God wants most from us is probably trust. See, when negative things assail us, the first thing that is assaulted is our very trust in God. We question – is He still in control? Does He still care? Does He still notice? Is He still using His power in my favour?

God intentionally uses things that are antagonistic to our belief that He loves us, to produce that very thing. Faith does not grow unless it is stretched. It takes a stretch of the mind to believe that God loves us in the face of suffering – but that is exactly what He wants.

For God soon rewards faith with the end of the situation, like he did with Job, where we see that trusting God is always the right thing to do. But God will not confirm your faith before you use it. The point of this kind of reaction is to continually state that we believe in God's future grace – that He will do as He has promised, and all things will ultimately work together for good to them that love God, as **Romans 8:28** says.

## 3. With joy and thanksgiving

Now, this one seems almost contradictory. How can I enjoy suffering? That's like expecting a child to enjoy a spanking. The whole point of the rod of correction is that it is a negative experience, and it is its sheer negativity that will hopefully cause the child not to repeat the action. How do you enjoy suffering – when the very definition of suffering is that it is something antagonistic to your comfort, joy or pleasure?

The answer is that we find our joy and pleasure not in the suffering itself, but in what it is producing. Obviously, we cannot enjoy the suffering itself, or by definition we are no longer suffering. But when we consider all the things we've seen – the things God is doing – producing endurance, strengthening our faith, encouraging others, humbling us to be more effective, making us Christ-centred – this is cause for joy.

This is the joy a body-builder has in the midst of the pain of exercise – he knows it is shaping his muscles as he wants it to. The reasons for our joy in the midst of suffering can be many. Consider some of the verses that speak of it:

- **Acts 5:41** – *“And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.”* Here, the apostles enjoyed the fact that they had been selected by God to be like Christ. They did not rejoice in being beaten itself, but in being beaten for Christ.
- **Matthew 5:11-12** – *“Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.”* We are to rejoice in the fact that when we are persecuted, we are in extremely good company. We are to rejoice that rewards await us for willingly enduring persecution.
- **James 1:2-18** – *“My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations. Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.”* In all these things, we are to take joy in what suffering is doing in us, through us, and even for us. We do not delight in the pain, in the affliction, but like Paul – in what it is producing.
- **2 Corinthians 12:9-11** – *“Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.”*

#### 4. With strength and purpose

The final way scripture instructs us to experience suffering is to go into our suffering with courage. God commands His people often to *“Be strong and of a good courage”* (**Joshua 1:9**). We face what we must with the strength God supplies. **Proverbs 24:10** says: *“If thou faint in the day of adversity, thy strength is small.”* We must not be wimpy, weak or lazy when the trials come. As Paul charged Timothy:

*Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also. Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.*

**2 Timothy 2:2**

What gives us this courage? The thought that what we are doing is working together for the glory of God.

*And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. 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.*

**Romans 8:17-18**

So suffering is going to come. It's inevitable. God has good reasons for using it in our lives. As we reflect on those reasons, we can focus on the main thing: the 'how' of suffering. How to react so as to glorify God. Without revenge, without murmuring, without discouragement or turning back, without bewilderment or shame, but instead with patience, with hope and faith, with joy, and with strength and purpose.

As we then choose to act, not react, to suffering, we glorify God by resembling His Son in the midst of our suffering.