

The background of the entire image is a photograph of a desert landscape. The foreground is filled with a vast expanse of dry, cracked earth, forming a complex, irregular pattern of polygonal shapes. In the distance, a range of low, rugged mountains stretches across the horizon. The sky above is a mix of soft colors, including pale blue, yellow, and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is one of aridity and resilience.

Getting the Most from what We Like the Least

The Stewardship of Suffering

Pastor Ron Berrus

Getting the Most from What We Like the Least

The Seasons and Stewardship of Suffering

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INTRODUCTION

This book is sent with a prayer that God will use His Word to strengthen the souls of His saints who know their God and Savior yet who are sorely tested by the storms of suffering that threaten to overwhelm them.

I do not speak as one who has experienced a long season of great or continual suffering...yet. However, as a pastor for 40 years, I have walked daily among the suffering. My companions in this life's journey have broken hearts and broken relationships, broken bodies and broken minds. Hospitals, nursing homes, prison cells, hospice centers, funeral homes and counseling rooms are my homes away from home. I share this study as one who, like you, knows that God's Word is true no matter how horrific our circumstances may be. It is my sincere prayer that the truths we discover in Scripture will strengthen, comfort, encourage and enable you to get the most out of what we all like the least... suffering.

You will quickly notice that the style of this work is that of a personal conversation, like the ones I've had hundreds of times with those who suffer. As I sit down to write these words, I just returned from an hour's visit with a family planning the funeral of their mother who had spent the last four years battling Alzheimer's in a nursing home. I left that home to drive to the trauma center of a major hospital in order to visit a family at the bedside of a young mom who had just been life-flighted there after being run over by a car. On the way home I talked on my cell phone with a young believer whose parents and other family members remain in war-torn Syria to which he is not allowed to return. I came home to find a message to return the call of a young woman in a psychiatric hospital. The reality of suffering and the questions it brings are unrelenting. How I thank God for His Word and the comfort and truth it contains for all those who suffer and those who walk beside them.

SUFFERING

"There are two kinds of people in the world - those who suffer and those who don't. The ones who don't are the ones you have never met, and never will." This old saying reminds us of the reality that if we are honest, we must admit that we *all* suffer in this life. We are born into this life through pain, continue the journey with pain, and conclude the journey in pain. Though not always extreme, constant, or unendurable, suffering is undeniably our common lot as creatures of clay in a world under the curse.

The Bible contains 672 verses referring to sorrow, pain, suffering and hardship. A quick survey of the Old Testament recounts copious stories of extensive suffering:

Adam and Eve - loss of God's presence, loss of paradise and the tree of life

Cain and Abel - loss of Abel by murder and Cain by banishment

Abraham and Sarah - suffering of infertility, famine, conflict with and loss of nephew Lot as he ruins his life and family, sinful decision regarding Hagar and the consequences of continual conflict, the anguish of Abraham being called to sacrifice his son Isaac

Hagar - suffering enslavement, mistreatment, rejection and abandonment

Ishmael - suffering rejection and displacement from his father's family

Jacob - lies and consequences, Esau's death threat, mistreatment by father-in-law, sons' conflict, loss of Joseph, death of wife Rachel in childbirth leaving him alone with infant son Benjamin

Joseph - suffering rejection, mistreatment, slander, abandonment, enslavement, imprisonment

Moses - family displacement in childhood, rejection as an adult, suffering slander, continual conflict in leadership, death threats, loss of his dream to enter Canaan with his people...

And the biblical stories don't end there... David, Bathsheba, Uriah, Uzziah, Joseph and Mary, Lazarus, Mary and Martha... are all stories with major seasons of suffering. Add to that, nearly every apostle will die a martyr's death by stoning, crucifixion, beheading, or some other torturous means. Suffering comes in many forms and all of them bring pain: physical... emotional... mental... relational... spiritual. Nor does suffering remain in a single form. One kind of suffering nearly always activates others. The first book penned in Scripture is the account of extreme suffering in the life of the godliest man then alive. Job suffered the loss of family, wealth, health and friends. His intense and unrelenting physical pain is described in excruciating terms in Job 30. *"And now my life ebbs away; days of suffering grip me... night pierces my bones; my gnawing pains never rest... the churning inside me never stops... days of suffering confront me... I go about blackened, but not by the sun... my skin grows black and peels; my body burns with fever..."*

Nor is the pain limited to the physical. He lost all of his children. All he hoped for was gone. All he feared has happened. Yes, the book of Job teaches us much regarding suffering and the child of God; much, but not everything! The Bible will not give us every answer to every question that arises from our suffering. God's reply to Job's numerous and anguished questions were 75 additional questions in return. The answers Job gave to God's questions were "No," "I don't know," or "You, God." No, the Bible doesn't give us all the answers we *want* now, but it does contain all the answers that we *need* now. You certainly will not find all of them in this little book. But I hope the ones you do find bring you substantial and lasting comfort drawn from the well of the God-breathed Word.

CAUTION

The realities we will wrestle with in our study are designed primarily for personal application. No one of us needs every truth at the same time. Even our Lord Jesus, knowing that His disciples desperately needed more truth, chose to wait to reveal it until they were ready for it. *"I still have many things to say to you, but **you cannot bear them now**"* (John 16:12). Not every truth is bearable for every heart in every season. Caution is warranted in times of deep affliction. In each life there is time and truth made for each other. Let us seek God's wisdom for both, before we speak to broken hearts. The sufferer's greatest need may be your presence, a quiet embrace, and a sympathetic silence. I will never forget standing on the front step of the home of a friend whose wife had just died. I had spent countless hours reading Scripture, praying, singing, talking, and weeping with him and his wife through a three-year journey of indescribable agony. Standing there, listening to the hollow echo of the doorbell and his

footsteps coming down the stairs, I just couldn't think of a single thing to say! As the door opened, I simply looked my friend in the eye, shook my head, and embraced him. His response was immediate... "Thank you. Thank you for not saying anything! Thanks for just being here." I have heard similar responses again and again from suffering saints. "You didn't say anything. You just listened. It meant so much." Sometimes *not knowing what to say* is because we *shouldn't say anything*. I admit to my shame that I have hurt sufferers by saying poorly timed truths that did more harm than good, spoken prematurely and immaturely. Let us not forget that Job's friends were a great comfort to him, *until they opened their mouths!* The wisest of men told us, "*There is a time for everything...A time to keep silence and a time to speak*" (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7 NIV). Let's be wise and learn that sometimes silence truly is golden. Just be there, because your presence speaks love, loud and clear.

FOUNDATIONAL OVERVIEW

The Bible lays out several foundational truths regarding suffering. Since Adam and Eve rebelled in the Garden the curse of sin descended on all mankind, bringing many and varied consequences. Among the many results of sin is the reality of suffering in this world. "*We know that **the whole creation has been groaning...** Not only so, but **we ourselves groan inwardly** as we wait for the redemption of our bodies... In the same way, **the Spirit intercedes for us with groans** that words cannot express*" (Romans 8:22, 23, 26). The pervasive reality is that creation groans, the Christian groans and even the Creator groans from the burden of sin-caused suffering. Yet, we must not forget that 1) God is still sovereign, and 2) God is still purposeful, and 3) God is still merciful. We, as His people, must learn to understand and embrace our temporary, necessary suffering so that it brings glory to Him and growth to us, as suffering shapes us into His likeness.

Let's be clear at the outset. Though this study will not provide all the answers to all the questions that flood the minds and hearts of sufferers, it is intended to help us discover how to benefit from the suffering that God entrusts us with. Yes, suffering is *entrusted* to believers from God Himself. "*For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ... to suffer for His sake...*" (Philippians 1:29).

Suffering in the life of the obedient believer is both *for a season* and *for a stewardship*. Suffering is not a simple matter of either chastisement or punishment for sin in the life of the disobedient. Job's friends had to learn that hard lesson several millennia ago. Let us heed that warning and the reality that even the godliest believer will suffer, sometimes far more than the ungodly in this life. But the suffering of God's children is both temporary and purposeful. We may have no choice about the experience of suffering. But we do have choices regarding our response to that suffering, and to the God who has purposed it.

So, fellow pilgrim, come and walk through the Scriptures in the valley of your season and stewardship of suffering. The truths we discover may just change our lives. They're designed to do that very thing.

PART 1: QUESTIONS FROM THE CRUCIBLE

Suffering brings the reality test to our faith. That's why suffering is always accompanied by questions. It is evident to the student of Scripture that Bible characters often ask questions we fear to voice. Is God really there? Is God really good? How can I trust God if He lets these awful things happen to me? Does He hear my prayers? He's supposed to be all powerful and good, why doesn't He help me? Job, David, Asaph, and even our Lord Jesus on the cross cried tear choked questions in their deep suffering. Why me? Why this? Why now? How long? Now what? Though God doesn't promise to reveal the answers to all our questions, it doesn't mean the questions are irrelevant or unimportant. Our focus in this study is the often-asked questions that *can* be answered in Scripture. We seek to know what we can from *Scripture*, even as we bow to the God of the mysteries left unanswered. *"The secret things belong to the Lord our God..."* (Deuteronomy 29:29).

Chapter 1

Q. 1: Where did suffering come from?

A.: In paradise, by our sin

"To the woman he said, 'I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.' To Adam he said, 'Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' 'Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return'" (Genesis 3: 16-19).

From reading the first two chapters of Genesis, it is evident that suffering was non-existent in the beginning. Suffering began when Adam and Eve rebelled and broke God's clear and simple command as recorded in Genesis chapter three. Simply put, the cause of suffering originally and universally is Adam's sin. "Therefore, as sin entered into the world through one man, and death through sin; and so death passed to all men, because all sinned. (Romans 5:12 WEB).

Suffering is our new normal because of his old sin.

God warned Adam and Eve that they must not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or they would suffer death. (Genesis 2:16-17) In addition to death, other kinds of suffering are described in the declaration of the curse which resulted from the sin. (Genesis 3:6-9) Let's consider the many forms of suffering resulting from Adam's sin.

Physical Pain *"To the woman he said, 'I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children..."* (Genesis 3:16). The greatest of joys are now accompanied by the severest pain. What a reminder this is of the close association of life's joys and sorrows conjoined by the curse! If

man had not sinned, life's unmixed joys would have remained unpolluted and unceasing in this world. Now, due to sin, even our highest earthly joys are temporary and admixed with sorrow and suffering.

Relational Pain *"Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you..."* (Genesis 3:16). This includes conflict, competition, unfulfilled longing, frustration, disappointment, and more. Perhaps the greatest of all suffering is relational suffering. Broken relationships bring a depth of heartache, regret, ever-unfulfilled longings and sorrow impossible to put into words.

Exhaustion *"To Adam he said, 'Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life'"* (Genesis 3:17). As Solomon expounded in Ecclesiastes 2:4-23, all that we make, acquire, buy or build will not last. What is built up will one day be torn down. What is obtained will one day be relinquished. Man spends his life laboring for that which he cannot keep. The work never ends, yet the accomplishment ends all too soon.

Frustration *"It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field"* (Genesis 3:18). Man no longer simply walks through paradise picking fruit from every passing tree in the Garden of Eden. He had to leave paradise. The world outside was under the curse of sin and death. Man now battles weeds and worms, disease and drought, thorns and thistles, laboring endlessly to produce a crop to sustain life. While this curse concept is agricultural, the reality of frustration spans all of human experience. How often have the words escaped our lips, "Can't anything ever go right? Just once!" Our best intentions and our best efforts do not always produce the intended results, and sometimes the very opposite. Something's drastically wrong. That something is the sin-caused curse in our world and in our souls.

Continual Battle for Survival Ending in Death *"By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return"* (Genesis 3:19). The irresistible end of all our constant, strenuous, frustrating efforts to sustain life is inevitable physical death. This is not to cause us to despair, but to instruct us as to life's realities so we make appropriate preparation. Oh, how sweet the aroma of the gospel rises from the death of the Son of God, bringing us unending hope in this life and the next!

Now, while it is true that *some* of our earthly sufferings can be traced to our own sins and foolish choices, there is much suffering that is *not* the result of our *own* immediate sins. (Job 1-2) But in the final analysis, all suffering is a consequence of sin, either Adam's sin and its curse on the earth, or my sin and its consequences in life, or someone else's sin and its consequences upon me and others not responsible. But God did not cause the sin and therefore God is not the cause of the suffering. True, God pronounced the judgment that resulted in the suffering, but the cause is found in sinful man. The judge is not to be blamed for the criminal's sentence if the verdict and penalty are right and just. And the consequences of the judge's verdict will always bring additional suffering to others who had no

hand in the original transgression. It was like that in the Garden. It is still like that today. I live with your choices and you live with mine.

HARD TRUTH

Paradise was lost by our own sin. Any earthly pleasure sinners experience is undeserved and the gift of God's pure grace. Rather than cursing God for our sufferings, I should bless Him for the smallest mercies and own that I deserve sufferings far worse than I am receiving. This is hard truth but deep truth. (Psalm 103:10) Why is this hard truth so important? To keep me from poisoning my relationship with God, blaming Him for my suffering and being swallowed by bitterness and self-pity. Owning my responsibility for sin and receiving the unmerited grace of God in Christ is the foundation on which repentance and forgiveness stand, and from which comes the eventual end of all my suffering in a restored and permanent paradise known as the New Jerusalem. (Revelation 21:1-5)

Now, go back and highlight or underline the things you want to remember and share with someone else.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) Which of the above truths are most helpful to you? Why?
- 2) Which of the above truths are difficult for you to accept intellectually? Emotionally?
- 3) Why do humans tend to blame God for our suffering?
- 4) In what ways is God truly connected to our suffering?
- 5) Do you recognize that every human being is a fellow sufferer in a fallen world? How will understanding this reality help us, and them?

"Lord, You made a perfect world in the beginning. You made perfect people and placed them in a paradise called Eden with a promise of everlasting blessedness if they had obeyed. Adam and Eve never understood all the consequences their sin would bring, but You did. You warned them in words that were simple and clear. Today I live with suffering caused by their choices and my own. I am so thankful that You have made a way for me to endure today's suffering as well as to be delivered from all suffering in Your restored presence forever. Help me to remember the big picture, and Your infinitely bigger grace, as I walk in the midst of my suffering today."

Chapter 2

Q. 2: Is God in control of my suffering?

A.: Yes

The deist's god put the laws of nature in motion and then left man to himself. In this view, things just happen. God is not personally involved. The deist's god, however, is not the biblical God. God has not only ordered the universe by predictable processes, but is directly involved in our day-to-day lives. He is both sovereign and active, then and now. He is sovereign in that He is accomplishing His plan which is unchangeable and certain for all time. He Himself is active in working that plan out in our individual daily lives, both knowingly and purposefully.

Some try to absolve God from being responsible for our suffering by declaring that though He knows the future in His foreknowledge, He isn't directly involved in it. While it is evident that God does indeed know what is going to happen, that is because He has included it in His all-encompassing plan and is working in and through it all. God could have created a different plan. He didn't. He created the plan He is working out, and that includes our suffering by design. It is far more comforting to rest in a God that is in charge, all knowing, completely sovereign, and actively working His plan encompassing the movement of every atom for all time, than a deist's god who simply sees what is coming, is not involved, and cannot or will not prevent the suffering because He is either incapable or uncaring. Why trust in a god who is not in control? Trust the true God, the sovereign One, with all of the mysteries, knowing that what is a mystery is a mystery only to us, not to Him! *"The secret things belong unto the LORD our God..."* (Deuteronomy 29:29).

There are a multitude of Scriptures which declare the active sovereignty of God in human suffering. The following are a few examples of this mysterious, yet precious reality. We will return to several of these passages later, as some of them are brimming with sweetness for the suffering saint.

Satan was the perpetrator of Job's suffering, but could not act without God's permission.

"The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.' Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord" (Job 1:12).

Satan was limited in the extent of the suffering he could bring into Job's life.

"The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life'" (Job 2:6).

Israel's suffering was claimed by God as His work, as part of His plan.

"See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction" (Isaiah 48:10).

Paul's sufferings were planned and ordained by God, and then revealed to Paul at the time of his salvation.

"I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9:16).

Suffering for believers is inescapable. ("had to...")

"In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials" (1 Peter 1:6).

Suffering is appointed to believers as part of their calling.

"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:21-23).

Suffering is expected, allotted and intended for greater future joy.

"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:12).

Suffering is according to God's will and plan for those who follow Him.

"So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good" (1 Peter 4:19).

Suffering for believers is limited to a specific time period, and will be used for our growth by God.

"And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast" (1 Peter 5:10).

Suffering, even Satan-instigated suffering, is shown to be limited by God in time, extent and purpose.

Suffering is not to cause us anxiety or fear, since it is limited, allowed, ordained, and eventually rewarded by God Himself.

"Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10).

"Lord, You have said and shown that You are in control of this suffering. This is both bitter and sweet... bitter because I know You could have prevented it and I can't see why You didn't. But it is sweet to know that You have allowed it for my good. There are moments when I can't see anything good coming out of this. But I will trust You. I will keep looking at Your Son's cross and believe that out of the worst, You bring the best to us. Help me believe, O Father. Help me believe. In the name of my cross-bearer I pray. Amen."

Q. 3 Could God prevent my suffering?

A.: Yes

When severe suffering is our portion, or that of those we love deeply, we wish we could do something to remove it. We think, "I would do something if I could." We are faced then with the two realities of concern and ability. We know the two reasons why people do not take action to remove suffering: either they lack the concern or the power; either they do not care or they are unable. Dare we accuse our God of either? We hear the whisper of the evil one, "Maybe your God can't stop it. He really isn't in control. Or maybe it's because you don't matter to Him and He just doesn't care."

Again, the opening verses of Job hold the key to exposing these satanic suggestions. From the lips of a frustrated Satan himself we hear the truth that God is in control and must give permission to allow any attack upon His own. *"Have you not put a hedge around him (Job) and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land"* (Job 1:10).

Satan was absolutely powerless to bring about suffering in Job's life because God had placed His protective hedge around Job. If the hedge remained, Satan's attack was impossible. Even Satan knew with great vexation that suffering is no exception to the reality that all things are under God's sovereign control. We may not know God's specific purpose in the suffering He allows in our lives at this time. But we cannot doubt Scripture's clear teaching regarding God's sovereignty in allowing-or preventing it, all according to His will.

"Lord, my windshield on this journey in suffering is fogged and cracked, iced and scratched. I can see in the Scriptures the unmistakable evidence that You are in control. Take the steering wheel, O God. Guide me on this icy road of pain and grief. Show me the way. Let me not stray from the road of Your will. Neither man nor demon can touch me without Your permission. I will follow and trust You, O Sovereign Savior. Amen."

Q. 4: I'm really struggling emotionally. Are my reactions to suffering normal?

A.: Yes

Real suffering brings real struggling. Don't pretend otherwise. The godliest man alive in his day, Job, expresses it in chapters long, loud and raw with honest emotions spilling over in waves of grief, anger and confusion. God was not offended by Job's struggle. He even commended Job for his honesty in Job 42:7. Job did not speak evil of God. But he did express the struggle in terms we can all identify with. The deeper the suffering, the deeper the turmoil. Anger, frustration, confusion and inner conflict are all common to those who suffer. Listen to the words of another sufferer named Asaph as he expresses his inner battle with blunt honesty.

*Surely God is good to Israel, To those who are pure in heart!
But as for me, **my feet came close to stumbling, my steps had almost slipped.**
For I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For there are no pains in their death, and their body is fat.
They are not in trouble as other men, **nor are they plagued** like mankind.
Therefore pride is their necklace; the garment of violence covers them.
Their eye bulges from fatness; the imaginations of their heart run riot.
They mock and wickedly speak of oppression; they speak from on high.
They have set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue parades through the earth.
Therefore his people return to this place, and waters of abundance are drunk by them.
They say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High?"
Behold, **these are the wicked; and always at ease**, they have increased in wealth.
Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence;
For I have been stricken **all day long** and chastened **every morning.***

(Psalm 73:1-14)

Asaph is thrashing wildly in the quicksand of conflicting thoughts arising from his constant and ever-increasing sufferings. As with quicksand, the more he struggles, the deeper he sinks. The more he tries to do the good, the more the bad keeps happening. And the more the wicked do wrong, the better things seem to go for them. Throwing his hands up we hear him say, "What's the use in doing right if everything keeps going wrong?!" Like an old college roommate of mine frequently shouted, "I can't take it anymore!" Suffice it to say, real suffering brings real struggles. If you finish the psalm you will discover that entering the Temple (God's presence) and hearing the Scriptures (God's purpose and promises) provided an eternal perspective that, while not changing his circumstances, totally changed his perspective.

“We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9).

Hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down... all these are descriptions of suffering. The word perplexed means confused. Confusion is one of the hardest parts of suffering. We simply don't know “Why this? Why me? Why now? How long?” Don't be surprised when suffering brings internal struggles you've never known before. This struggle is an essential part of both the danger and design of suffering in our lives. It is normal, real, and often exhausting.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) Paraphrase Psalm 73 in your own words, in everyday language.
- 2) How did the truth of God's sovereign control over his suffering make it more difficult for Asaph?
- 3) How did the truth of God's sovereign control over his suffering help Asaph?
- 4) How would an atheist/materialist explain suffering? (Hinted at in the words of the wicked)
- 5) How would a Christian with a low view of God's sovereignty explain suffering?

“Lord, You are God. You are in control. You could keep my suffering from happening or take it away in a moment. You haven't done that. I don't understand why. But I will trust You. I will trust You without answers. I will trust You because of the cross. Keep my eyes on Calvary. Let me see Your Son more clearly in my suffering that I too may desire nothing on earth but You. In His sweet name I pray. Amen.”

Chapter 3

Q. 5: Is suffering a normal part of life as God's child?

A.: Yes.

When suffering is both constant and continual, we have to ask, "Is this normal?" We want to know if anybody else is going through this, or if we are singled out for some reason. Be assured, the Bible says suffering is normal for now. This normalcy of suffering does not discount that not everyone suffers to the same extent, in the same ways, or for the same duration. Some suffer in ways others will never experience. Nevertheless, believers are told that suffering is indeed to be expected as part of God's common plan for His children.

The Apostle John listed suffering as one of three things he shared as a "brother and companion" with all God's family, along with co-citizenship in God's kingdom and patient waiting for Christ's return.

"I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation (suffering) and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:9).

The Apostle Peter, having already told us that suffering was not to be viewed as strange or unusual (*"Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you"* [1 Peter 4:12]), now tells us that we should expect it and he even includes suffering in his closing doxology!!

"But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen" (1 Peter 5:10-11).

While we love the Doxology that begins... "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," perhaps 1 Peter 5:10-11 should be entitled, *The Sufferer's Doxology!*

The Apostle Paul, in concert with John and Peter, calls suffering something granted (assigned, entrusted) to us by Christ, in addition to saving faith!

"For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake..." (Philippians 1:29).

And finally, our Lord Jesus Christ told His followers, and us by application,

"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

In the world you will have tribulation, persecution, affliction, trouble, and suffering. Yes, 1) in a fallen world, 2) under the curse, 3) as believers with an evil enemy, and 4) as children of a wise and sovereign God, suffering is normal and to be expected, with confidence, not with fear and dread.

Q. 6: Does God enjoy seeing us suffer?

A.: No

Though God is in control, and doesn't prevent our suffering, it does not mean that He enjoys the fact that we are going through it. God ordained the prophet Jeremiah and told him of the severe suffering he would face in his ministry to rebellious Judah. Jeremiah poured out his anguish over Jerusalem's destruction and his own bitter suffering in the book of Lamentations. In the middle of this funeral lament, we read his own honest anguish, a prophecy of the coming suffering of Christ, and then a powerful reminder that God does not enjoy seeing us suffer.

He has filled me with bitterness,

He has made me drink wormwood.

He has also broken my teeth with gravel, and covered me with ashes.

You have moved my soul far from peace; I have forgotten prosperity. And I said, "My strength and my hope have perished from the LORD.

Remember my affliction and roaming, the wormwood and the gall."

My soul still remembers and sinks within me.

This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope.

Through the LORD'S mercies we are not consumed,

because His compassions fail not,

they are new every morning;

great is Your faithfulness.

"The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I hope in Him!"

The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him.

It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

It is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth.

Let him sit alone and keep silent, because God has laid it on him;

Let him put his mouth in the dust-there may yet be hope.

Let him give his cheek to the one who strikes him, and be full of reproach.

For the Lord will not cast off forever.

*Though **He causes grief**, Yet **He will show compassion** according to the multitude of His mercies.*

For He does not afflict willingly, nor grieve (willingly) the children of men
(Lamentations 3:15-33).

Jeremiah, under the inspiration of the Spirit, embraces both realities that God indeed is sovereign in assigning the grief, yet He does not delight in our distress and sorrows. Like a father, He allots and allows suffering only for purposes of greater good, not with pleasure or indifference. If His child is to suffer grief, it has heaven's wisdom and love surrounding it.

While speaking of Israel's suffering in Egypt, God's prophet Isaiah told us that not only did God not delight in His people's pain, but that He Himself was a co-sufferer with them. *"In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His Presence saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He bore them and carried them all the days of old"* (Isaiah 63:9). Let these words sink down into your heart: *"In all their affliction He was afflicted."* God is not a distant observer to the suffering of His people. He is both present and participating in the suffering with His own. Jesus said to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, *"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"* (Acts 9:4). Saul was persecuting followers of Jesus, not Jesus. Jesus had ascended to the right hand of the Father perhaps years before this. Yet, Jesus says that Saul's persecution was of Him, precisely because He is present and participating with us in our sufferings. What He doesn't prevent, He participates in with His own!

Our Lord Jesus Himself not only participates in our suffering, but is Himself the greatest sufferer mankind has ever known. No matter how great our suffering, He suffered more. He truly knows by bitter experience the depths of real suffering in every aspect of human experience, and then far more as the suffering and rejected sin-bearing Sacrifice.

Q. 7: Does suffering mean God is displeased with me?

A.: Not necessarily

Suffering as Judgment: Sodom and Gomorrah

The Bible does reveal that some suffering is God's punitive judgment on unbelievers who refuse to repent. *"In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire"* (Jude 7). Many other texts say the same.

Suffering as Discipline: The Church in Corinth

And the Scriptures also teach that suffering can be the result of God's disciplinary action in response to the sins of His own children, such as the disobedient believers in Corinth who ate the Lord's Table with careless disregard for its sacred symbolism of the suffering Savior's death and their own unexamined hearts. (See Appendix 4 for more on this subject.) *"For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world"* (1 Corinthians 11:29-32).

But many other passages make it clear that suffering may be the result of the greater purposes of God, some revealed and others hidden. Perhaps the two greatest sufferers who ever lived were Job and Jesus. Both demonstrate with absolute clarity that suffering is not always the result of an individual's disobedience or of God's displeasure with them.

Job

God's most honored servant in that ancient day was named Job. His suffering was the result, not of God's displeasure, but of His pleasure with Job! *"Then the LORD said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil'"* (Job 1:8).

Job's suffering was allotted to him to demonstrate the worthiness of God to be worshipped even in the midst of life's worst sufferings. Job's friends automatically assumed suffering is always evidence of God's displeasure in a person's life, because of that person's sin. They said that if Job would stop his secret sinning, his suffering would end. They were wrong. Boy, were they ever wrong! *"After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, 'I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. So now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has'"* (Job 42:7-8).

We must not move too quickly past this fact.

It seemed perfectly obvious to these men why Job was suffering. They were wrong.

They had no doubts about their theology of suffering. They were wrong.

They believed they needed to defend God against Job's heart turmoil. They were wrong.

They were certain they pleased God and Job did not. They were wrong.

They were certain Job was wrong and they were right. They were wrong. Every time!

Let us learn not to judge the sufferings of others. We are likely to be wrong, too.

Jesus

Job suffered, being distinguished for his godliness. How much more then is the suffering in the life of the Lord Jesus, who pleased His Father with complete obedience and submission, clear evidence that suffering is not always a result of individual sin.

By suffering, Jesus learned lessons of obedience and submission in his humanity that nothing else could teach. *"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered..."* (Hebrews 5:7-8). This no doubt included Gethsemane's suffering, as well as that of the cross itself. *"He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,' he said to them. 'Stay here and keep watch.' Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 'Abba, Father,' he said, 'everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will'"* (Mark 14:33-36).

Suffering saint, if you know you are yielded to God, surrendered to His will, having all known sin confessed and seeking His glory, then be assured that if the suffering is not removed it is not because

God is displeased with you. Listen to the counsel of God, not the lies of Satan, or the accusations of Job's comforters who do not know your heart. God is sovereign in your suffering. He is present in your suffering. He is sharing in your suffering. He is working in your suffering. He will remove it the very second it completes His purposes.

Q 8: Is suffering a good thing?

A: In itself, no

God has good purposes in the suffering of the saints, but suffering is not good in and of itself. If it were, God would have included it in heaven. As we've already seen, suffering was not original. Suffering was consequential to Adam's sin. Suffering is a result of the curse, not the blessing. We also discover that suffering is not eternal. Paul calls our afflictions (sufferings) "light and momentary" (2 Corinthians 4:17-18) compared to the "heavy and eternal weight of glory" soon to be ours. (Don't forget that the Apostle Paul is speaking here. What he calls "light suffering," as compared to others was extreme. Yet compared to heaven's extreme weight of glory, his suffering is described as light!) Suffering is not original and suffering is not eternal for the saints. The saints in the New Jerusalem will never know suffering in any way ever again.

*"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and **he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.**' He who was seated on the throne said, '**I am making everything new!**' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.' He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from **the spring of the water of life.** He who overcomes will **inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son**'" (Revelation 21:1-7).*

Suffering is not good. If death is called an enemy and suffering will be forever removed, suffering is not good in itself. Suffering may be used for good and greater purposes, but it still is not good in itself. Therefore, we should never desire that we or others suffer. As a matter of fact, to desire that others suffer is called malice, a sin repeatedly warned against in Scripture. While I am called to accept suffering in my own life, I am not called to consider it good in itself. It is a good, sovereign, trustworthy and wise God that makes good come from it. It is God who is good, not my suffering.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) What kinds of suffering are to be expected due to living in a fallen world?
- 2) What kinds of suffering are to be expected as believers?

- 3) What is the difference between a believer accepting and expecting suffering and a believer simply being a pessimist? Are believers called to a life of pessimism? 1 Peter 3:15
- 4) How can we maintain a biblical hope in the face of the reality of universal suffering?
- 5) Can a believer embrace suffering in God's will while at the same time rejecting it as a result of the fall? Can we hold both realities at the same time?

"Lord, sometimes the hardest part in this suffering is knowing it's not a good thing, that You could prevent it, and that You didn't. But I know enough to know that You are good, even though suffering and sorrow are not. And I won't accept a low view of Your sovereignty that says You just can't stop all of it. You can, and You will one day. Lord, give me the inner strength of heart that embraces You and will not let go, no matter how much it hurts or how deep I must go into this valley. You are here. You are mine. You are enough. In Jesus' sweet name. Amen."

Chapter 4

Q 9: If I have enough faith, will my suffering be taken away?

A: Not necessarily

God answers prayer. We are invited to come to God's throne of grace and make our requests before our God. We are to come in faith that God is able, and faithful in all His ways. God will at times wonderfully remove our suffering. And sometimes He wonderfully does not. Faith is essential in the asking, but continued suffering may not at times be removed even with fervent, sincere, believing prayer. Let us remember that our salvation is due to God *not* answering the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane for relief from the suffering of death. Jesus asked for escape, yet surrendered to the will of His Father to accept suffering in its most extreme form.

If you just had enough faith...

How many times have we heard it said, "Jesus said, 'If you ask anything in my name, I will do it,'" and "Whatever you ask in faith believing you will receive" and "According to your faith be it unto you" and "If you had faith like a mustard seed you could say to this mountain be cast into the sea and it would obey you.." and on and on.

Do we discount such glorious promises of our Lord? No! They are marvelous promises and true. But the context reveals that they are not blanket promises as the "name it and claim it" crowd would have us assume. Each of these promises must be seen in the larger framework of all the Bible teaches. If these promises were meant to cover every desire and whim of the believer, then we would have to draw some very disturbing conclusions including the following:

The reason people suffer is a lack of faith on their part. (What about Jesus, Job, Joseph and Paul?)

People suffer and die due to a lack of faith on their part or on the part of those praying for them.

Therefore, every believer suffers and dies as a result of a lack of faith.

Therefore, every believer suffers and dies due to unbelief.

Therefore, every believer suffers and dies a failure at the end.

The Bible simply does not teach any of these conclusions. They are completely rendered false by God's condemnation of Job's friends who pronounced these verdicts. Even those who preach such non-sense suffer in this life and die. Faith healers suffer and die. Health and wealth preachers suffer and die.

Unless Jesus soon returns, this entire generation will suffer and die.

Dear one, faith is not manipulation! Prayer is not *the means by which I get God to do my will*.

Faith and prayer are the means by which *God enables me to do His will* in and through all of life's events, including suffering.

The apostle Paul is much like the weeping prophet Jeremiah, to my way of thinking. Like Jeremiah, Paul had great compassion for his people (Romans 9:1-3) while suffering greatly at their hands. Paul was called to salvation and given the revelation at the outset that he would suffer greatly. *"But the Lord said*

unto him (Ananias), Go thy way: for he (Paul) is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: For I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:15-16).

And again in Acts 20:22-24, "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me-- the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace."

This suffering was essential to his call and included in God's plan and no prayer of his would remove it. God had other purposes in Paul's suffering as well as he relates in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10:

"To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Paul asserted that this "thorn in the flesh" – suffering – was "given" to him to keep him humble and weak, so that he would rely upon Christ and receive the power that comes from Christ only to the humble, weak, needy and dependent child. Paul did pray for this "thorn" to be removed. He prayed three times for this "thorn" to be removed, reminiscent of the three prayers of Jesus for removal of the "cup" in Gethsemane. While we do not know what the "thorn" was, it was severe ("torment"), Satan-directed ("messenger of Satan"), and painful in the extreme ("thorn"). Some conjecture it was increasing blindness (Galatians 6:11), others recurring illness (1 Corinthians 2:3), others a slanderer and accuser seeking to ruin his ministry (1 Corinthians 4:11-13). Whatever the suffering's source, it was deep, real, and unceasing. Christ did not remove it then for Paul's greater good. Paul would accept it as such and learned the treasure hidden in torment, of a greater intimacy with Christ (Philippians 3:10) and a greater power in spiritual ministry.

Over the years I have been asked to pray for sufferers as though somehow my prayer would "work" when theirs would not. The whole idea that "the right words said by the right person in the right spirit with the right fervency the right number of times will do it" is just pagan nonsense. *"And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him"* (Matthew 6:7-8).

God through Christ is our loving Father who does not need to be impressed or manipulated into caring for us. He does not need information ("your Father knows") or motivation ("heard because of their many words"). We pray to our God who has all information and all motivation to do for us what is best. We pray to draw near, request and find rest in His care, and wait to see His answer in His time.

Q 10: Is it wrong to pray that suffering be removed?

A: No

The Example of Jesus

"They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,' he said to them. 'Stay here and keep watch.' Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 'Abba, Father,' he said, 'everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.' Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. 'Simon,' he said to Peter, 'are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.' Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. Returning the third time, he said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come'" (Mark 14:32-41).

Jesus prayed three times for the cup of suffering to be taken away. This prayer was sincere, anguished and fervent. He sweat drops of blood in his agony. He was, in his own words, *"overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."* Jesus provides us with the perfect model of both passionate request and patient submission. As is so often true for us in deep suffering, it took more than a single prayer. It was an on-going struggle and was faced repeatedly. Do not fear to ask again and again, even as Jesus instructed us in the parable of the unjust judge. He taught us that we should pray and keep on praying.

"Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: 'In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?'" (Luke 18:1-8).

The point of the parable is not that we need to wear God down to give us a hearing. Perish the thought. It is a contrast between an unjust judge and a loving heavenly Father. If the corrupt judge could be moved by persevering request, how much more our Father who loves His chosen will care for us. Never be ashamed or reluctant to ask.

The Example of Paul

In a passage about the Apostle Paul that we have examined before, we see repeated requests for relief from his suffering of the thorn. *"To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. **Three***

times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Paul asked for relief until God revealed to him that His plan was not to remove the suffering, but to provide sufficient grace for Paul's greater good. Our point at this time is that Paul requested relief in passionate and prolonged prayers, and that he did so repeatedly. Thus we may do the same.

Perhaps the clearest invitation from Paul's pen regarding our invitation to ask of God our heart's genuine desires is found in Philippians 4:6-8, "*Do not be **anxious** about anything, but **in everything, by prayer and petition**, with thanksgiving, **present your requests** to God. And the **peace** of God, which transcends all understanding, will **guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**"* Notice these important expressions pregnant with counsel: *Do not be anxious... in everything... by prayer and petition... present your requests to God... peace... guard your hearts and minds..."*

Suffering spawns anxiety. Anxiety spawns confusion. Confusion brings increased temptations. So Paul commands that we not be anxious, but rather, we are to pray. Replace the energy commonly wasted on worry with the profitability of prayer. Pray specifically. Pray in every circumstance... pray in every season... "*Pray without ceasing*" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Lay your requests, your heart's desires, your longings and pleadings before your God. God will give you peace through your prayers. And peace of mind and heart is your greatest need in the midst of your sufferings.

Q 11: Where can I find strength to go on in my suffering?

A: Grace

When suffering is the result of irreversible circumstances such as the death of loved ones, unhealable relationships, sexual abuse, or abandonment, terminal disease, or chronic pain it can consume every ounce of energy we possess simply to get out of bed, much less move ahead. Is there any possibility of ever finding the strength needed to go on in life? Is there any reason to believe that the pain and despair will be overcome and hope regained? With caution borne of deep respect for your losses, the answer is affirmative for one reason: the grace of God.

The Bible is filled with the stories of imperfect men and women who had to live with hard realities, sometimes due to their own sins, and sometimes due to the sins of others.

David had a history of sexual sin, planned Uriah's murder which then led to the death of the infant conceived by his adultery, broken family relationships, and arrogant leadership that caused the death of thousands more. He was prevented from accomplishing his glorious dream of building a temple for God. Hard realities to live with.

Paul had a history of murder and destroying innocent families. As a believer he suffered the loss of home, position in his nation, and he endured the hatred of his fellow Jews. Hard realities to live with.

Moses never entered Canaan because he lost his temper and let his arrogance get the best of his tongue and staff. One sinful, stupid choice changed the entire course of his life, literally and figuratively. He could see where he could not stand, and died with that longing unfulfilled. Hard realities to live with.

When I was six years old, my only brother, older by eight years, was accidentally shot and killed by his best friend. Most of my earliest memories are of my brother before, during and after the events surrounding his death. I will not describe them, but suffice it to say that many are strong, dark and enduring. My family at the time was not born again. The hope of the gospel was unknown to us. The pain was dealt with by removing all evidence of my brother's existence. Pictures were removed, possessions stored away, and conversations all avoided the reality of his existence. It was not until I was grown with a family of my own that a few of his belongings were brought out and given to me as keepsakes. Many are the hearts and minds that seek to bury memories that are still very much alive. But God offers more than help to bury painful memories. He offers to heal them, in His own time and way, by grace. That healing is gradual, but real. Some say time is the great healer. But while time and distance may soften the pain, only grace can heal it and restore the strength of living to the grieving soul.

God's grace will either remove our suffering, enable us to endure it, or eventually will do both.

The Person and Possessor of Grace

"Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-- yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:14-16).

The person and possessor of grace is our great High Priest, Jesus Christ. His high priestly ministry includes both mediation for the forgiveness of sins and the sympathetic support of his sovereign companionship each and every day.

JESUS OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST

A priest was a mediator, a descendent of Aaron and Levi, who offered sacrifices for sin to restrain God's wrath on sinners. The book of Leviticus prescribes their duties. (Leviticus = Levi-teuchos = Levi's Scroll)

A high priest was a special mediator, a son of Aaron who offered sacrifices for sin in the Temple's holiest place, the holy of holies, on the Day of Atonement, once each year. He alone had access to the presence of God for this one day of annual sacrifice. He entered once that day with a sacrifice for his own sins. Then he entered a second time on that day with the blood sacrifice for the sins of the people.

Jesus is called not just a priest, or even a high priest, but a great high priest.

HE IS A GREAT HIGH PRIEST BECAUSE OF HIS PERSON. *"Jesus the Son of God"* He is the risen, glorified, sinless Son of God. He is not merely human, yet he is fully human. He is the Son of God and Son of Man.

HE IS A GREAT HIGH PRIEST BECAUSE OF HIS POSITION. *“who has gone through the heavens”* He has ascended through the heavens. He has not simply entered the earthly holy of holies for us with the blood of animals to provide temporary pardon like a son of Aaron. He is a great high priest having entered heaven itself. Hebrews chapter 1 told us that having made purification for sins, He sat down in heaven, at the right hand of God.

HE IS A GREAT HIGH PRIEST BECAUSE OF HIS WORK. His mediation for sinners was accomplished with His own blood. He is both Sacrifice and Priest. The sacrificial work is completed. The intercession and sympathy continue.

HE IS A GREAT HIGH PRIEST BECAUSE OF HIS SOVEREIGNTY. *“Let us then approach the throne”* He is seated on a throne at the Father’s right hand. He reigns. He is in complete control.

HE IS A GREAT HIGH PRIEST BECAUSE OF HIS SYMPATHY. *“Sympathize... tempted in every way, just as we are”* He was tempted in every way as we are. Jesus understands our sorrows and sufferings. He knows what we need and further, is able and willing to give it.

HE IS A GREAT HIGH PREIST BECAUSE OF HIS ACCESSABILITY. *“approach the throne... with confidence”* The place of grace is His throne. *“The throne of God”* is representative of his authority and power. God’s throne is called a *“throne of his kingdom”* in reference to nations; a *“great white throne”* in reference to the final judgment of unbelievers; and here it is called a *“throne of grace”* for suffering believers in need of sympathy, mercy and grace. He welcomes us into His holy dwelling place. We are told to come with confidence in His sovereign ability and His sympathetic receptivity.

HE IS A GREAT HIGH PRIEST BECAUSE OF HIS SUFFICIENCY. *“so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need”*

From Jesus we receive mercy to forgive us and cleanse us from sin. We also find at his throne of grace a supply of grace that helps us in our time of need. The word “help” in the text is the same word found in Acts 27:14-17, *“But not long after there arose against it a tempestuous wind, called Euroclydon. And when the ship was caught, and could not bear up into the wind, we let her drive. And running under a certain island which is called Clauda, we had much work to come by the boat: which when they had taken up, they used helps, undergirding the ship...”* The word “helps” refers to large, woven rope cables used to encircle the hull of the ship and which were drawn tight to prevent the wooden hull from breaking apart in the storm. The imagery is striking. We receive grace to hold us together in the tempest at the instant of our need. God’s grace alone can hold us together and keep us going when all human hope is gone and the storm is raging and we are powerless to change it. Our great High Priest, at His throne of grace, will meet you with gracious sympathy and provide grace to help time after time after time of need. This grace will be as incessant as your need for it. You can be confident of this, even when you can be confident of nothing else.

The Preparation for Grace is Found in Your Weakness Revealed in Your Suffering

Yet once more we return to this deep well of comfort in 2 Corinthians. *“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for **my power is made perfect in weakness.**’ Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For **when I am weak, then I am strong**”* (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Suffering requires persevering strength. Yet it is suffering that opens the door for it. Suffering brings us to the end of ourselves. And it is precisely when we come to the “I just can’t” moment, that we discover the sufficiency of grace that our self-sufficiency prevented us from receiving. His sufficient grace is poured out in sovereign strength in our weakness. Suffering creates our need and reveals our need even as it prepares us to receive the grace that meets the need. I do not think I fully understand Paul’s meaning in “delighting” in his sufferings. But among the meanings is included the reality that Christ’s power and strength flow to us in greatest measure when we are most aware of our inadequacy revealed in the sufferings of life.

The Prerequisite for Grace is Humility Brought Forth by Your Suffering

*“Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: ‘God opposes the proud but **gives grace to the humble**’”* (James 4:5-6).

Through suffering we see the hidden sins that easier times concealed. In the soul of the redeemed this leads to renewed repentance and fresh discoveries of grace in a humbled soul. This grace so desperately needed will be found by the humble, but hidden to the proud. God is ready to supply the grace we need to go on, when we are ready to ask Him for it. Suffering, like few other things, brings us to the end of ourselves, making us aware of our powerlessness, and it humbles us before both God and men. This humbling of the heart is essential for grace to be supplied. While the suffering is bitter, the results can be blessed indeed.

“Lord Jesus Christ, You are my great High Priest. I need no other. There is no other. You alone are the sinless yet sin-bearing Sacrifice, taking away my sins. You are the risen King of heaven, sovereign over all things. You alone are the sympathetic supplier of grace in my need. You alone are the all-sufficient, all-sympathetic, all-supplying, all-sovereign great High Priest. I lift up empty hands and weak arms with complete confidence in You, O Christ. Give me mercy and cleansing once more. Give me grace to hold on to You, and move me ahead in this journey of faith. Give me Yourself, and all shall be well. In your name alone I pray, Jesus, Son of God. Amen.”

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) How does the Scripture contradict the “name it and claim it” view that all suffering would be taken away if we just had enough faith?

- 2) Contrast one season of suffering that God removed with another season that God has not removed *but* has given you the grace to keep enduring. How have you grown through both?
- 3) How does the prayer of Jesus... “not My will but Yours be done”... express both the honest desire of the heart to escape suffering and the greater desire to obey God in it if it must be endured? How does this dual reality help us in our own suffering?

“Lord, You know all things. You know I want this suffering to be taken away. You know I wonder if I can keep on keeping on. You know the struggle. Yours was deeper than mine ever will be. So help me, Savior. Give me that same submission to Your will that You had to Your Father’s will. Your suffering was all for me. May my suffering bring Your will to pass in my life. Your will, O God, Your will be done. In Your name, O submissive Savior, Amen.”

Chapter 5

Q 12: Did Jesus really suffer like me?

A: Yes

When we speak of the sufferings of Christ, we immediately tend to focus on the cross. The cross is indeed the pinnacle of the sufferings of Jesus and the suffering which bought our redemption from sin. Yet, the sufferings of Jesus that occurred throughout his earthly life are important aspects of his ministry to us as our supremely understanding Friend, sympathetic High Priest, and perfect example. Knowing that Jesus really lived in our world, shared our sufferings, and experienced our losses gives us great encouragement to draw near to Him. Our Savior is not distant, then or now. He knows our sufferings by both omniscience as God and experience as man. What a Savior! What a Friend!

Physical Suffering

Jesus experienced physical exhaustion walking the dusty miles, teaching, preaching, healing, giving, living. In storm and wind, heat and cold, thirst and hunger, he endured.

“Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well...” (John 4:6).

“A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, ‘Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?’” (Mark 4:37-38).

Are you suffering exhaustion? Life in Jesus’s day was simple but hard. Jesus travelled by foot or row-boat. Food had to be prepared from scratch which included starting the fire, gutting the fish, drawing water. There was no canned food, no fast food, no electricity, no bottled water. Yes, Jesus did feed crowds by miraculous power. But how many times? Twice! Every other time He and His disciples took efforts practically unknown to us in America today. Our making a dish “from scratch” usually means buying the ingredients and simply putting them together, then turning on the stove or Crockpot and watching TV! Are you just plain worn out? Jesus was. Jesus knows. Jesus cares.

His suffering was more acute.

“Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ And they struck him in the face” (John 19:1-3).

“Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). Here they crucified him, and with him two others-- one on each side and Jesus in the middle” (John 19:17-18).

Flogging was carried out wielding whips with multiple strands, 39 times. The thorny crown was vicious and shoved down on His head, resulting in deep lacerations on His skull. He was punched in the face repeatedly by hardened fists. He was spit on and mocked and made to carry the cross out of Jerusalem, and finally He was crucified. Books have been written describing the agony of crucifixion. Jesus carried the cross. Jesus took the nails. Jesus refused the sedative. His suffering was intense, immense, indescribable.

Suffering Emotionally

Hebrews 4:12-15 speaks of the testing of Jesus “in every way as we” have been tested. He not only suffered physically, but like us He suffered emotionally. He suffered grief, ridicule and rejection.

Suffering Grief

We have no record of when Mary’s husband Joseph died, but it is assumed that his death occurred before Jesus’ public ministry since he is absent at that point. With the number of children born to Joseph and Mary after Jesus’ birth (Mark 6:3), and knowing Joseph was still living when Jesus, as a twelve-year-old, entered into discussions with the temple elders, we may estimate Joseph’s death to be when Jesus was between age 20 and 30. We have four primary accounts of Jesus weeping: first at Lazarus’ tomb; second when He wept over Jerusalem; third in the anguish of Gethsemane; and finally in the darkness of Golgotha’s cross. His weeping at Lazarus’ tomb is a powerful reminder that even though He would raise Lazarus from the dead within minutes, yet He truly grieved, wept tears, and was filled with sorrow even as we do at the death of dear friends and family members. We too have the knowledge that the resurrection and reunion are certain, but the sorrow remains. His sorrow and our sorrows, while not hopeless sorrows, are nonetheless deep, real, and painful.

Suffering Ridicule and Rejection

He was taunted by the Pharisees and priests who constantly accused Him of blasphemy, demon possession, and madness. He was mocked by the soldiers, and spit on in derision.

Jesus suffered relationally as His own brothers did not believe He was Messiah until after His resurrection. At one point His family came to take Him home, fearing He had gone mad. He was forsaken by His disciples, disowned by Peter, and betrayed to death by Judas. He was hated by His nation and listened to them riot for His death.

Suffering Mentally

Jesus was led into the desert by the Spirit for forty days of fasting and temptation by Satan. He knows the mental suffering of complete isolation in the desert wilderness with the additional burden of fasting and temptation heavy beyond explanation. The mental attack He experienced was extreme.

Jesus faced all that came into His life knowing it all before it would happen. One of the most striking phrases found in John’s gospel is the description of the foreknowledge of Jesus of all things. While found in the other gospels, John’s gospel emphasizes it repeatedly.

“But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men” (2:24).

“He did not need man’s testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man” (2:25).

“Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself” (6:15).

“It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father” (13:1).

"Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God..." (13:3).

"For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean" (13:11).

"Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, 'Who is it you want?'" (18:4)

"Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I am thirsty'" (19:28).

Jesus knew! How often do we thank God that we don't know what a day may bring forth? Having such knowledge of future suffering hidden from us is a mercy. Such mercy was not given to our Lord. The anguish of foreknowing the certainty of all that would happen to Him was His burden to bear alone. No wonder he sweat drops of blood in Gethsemane, and cried out again and again to be spared.

Suffering Spiritually

Jesus was under continual satanic attack even from His birth. Herod's plot to kill him as a child, Satan's 40-day attack in the desert, the attempt on His life by the synagogue in Nazareth, the repeated plots of the Pharisees and priests to trap Him... it was constant. And over and above all of this, the day came when the sinless One would become sin for us. He would carry our sins in His body on the cross. He would experience the fullness of suffering God's wrath physically, spiritually, mentally, relationally and emotionally. Ponder Isaiah 53 and the awful descriptions of His sufferings: *despised...rejected...man of sorrows... acquainted with grief... hid our faces from Him... punishment... wounds... all our iniquity laid on Him... oppressed... afflicted... cut off... stricken... crushed... put to grief... the suffering of his soul.*

The Epistle to the Hebrews is replete with references to the real and raw sufferings of Christ, for us, and like our sufferings.

*"...he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might **taste death for everyone**" (2:9).*

*"...it was fitting that God...should make the author of their salvation **perfect through suffering**" (2:10).*

*"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too **shared in their humanity**..." (2:14).*

*"For this reason he had to be **made like his brothers in every way**, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because **he himself suffered when he was tempted**, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (2:17-18).*

*"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have **one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-- yet was without sin**" (4:15).*

*"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, **he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears** to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.*

***Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered...**" (5:7-9).*

Let us never doubt the sympathy, sincerity, and steadfastness of Jesus for us and with us in our sufferings.

Q 13: Did Jesus suffer more than me?

A: Yes, infinitely more

As believers we will never suffer God's wrath due to us for our sin – never, ever, even in the smallest measure. But Jesus did! His suffering lies beyond human description, hidden in the heart of the triune God. Though He was sinless, yet He took our sins on Himself and all the anguish and pain they would bring. *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us..."* (2 Corinthians 5:21).

We cannot fathom the crushing weight of divine holiness, justice and wrath that would come down upon the Son of God as He carried the sins of the world on Calvary. This suffering was infinite in extent and measureless in experience. It was physical, mental, spiritual, and relational.

The Son and His Father, inseparably and eternally one, were separated, as Christ endured utter abandonment, judgment and wrath. His anguished cry from the cross echoes across the centuries... *"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Psalm 22:1).

All that heaven's justice required and eternal hell would not suffice to satisfy, our Savior experienced for us all. *"...he was pierced for our transgressions... crushed for our iniquities...punishment ... wounds... laid on him the iniquity of us all... Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer... the LORD makes his life a guilt offering..."* (Isaiah 53:5, 6, 10).

It does not minimize or trivialize the reality of our sufferings to recognize the infinitely greater sufferings of Christ. Rather, it magnifies the love of our God and gives us hope and peace to look into the face of such a suffering Savior and Friend, who suffered all for you and me, and to know His embrace and compassion in our hearts.

Jesus: "as human as Adam before the fall; as divine as the Father, Lord of all. "

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) Have you had a friend who was a real comfort to you in your sufferings because they he or she had been through the same kind of grief and pain? Describe what your friend did that was helpful.
- 2) How does the *full humanity of Jesus* comfort you in dealing with the realities of your own sufferings?
- 3) Compare your suffering and grief to the experiences of Jesus in the gospel accounts. What kinds of sufferings did Jesus experience that are similar to your own? (Consider physical, spiritual, emotional, or relational suffering.)
- 4) Explain as fully as you can this simple truth in the midst of your suffering: "Jesus knows." Write it all down.

“Lord, You are not a distant God. You are not a God who has never been where I’ve been. You are not a God who has never travelled this fallen world. You are God in all your glory and man in all his frailty - sinless, yet suffering; omnipotent, yet wearied; perfect, yet bleeding; knowing, yet crying; living, yet dying. I find my rest in You, O suffering, sovereign Savior. I pray in that name given You as You took on our nature, Jesus. Amen.”

Chapter 6

Q 14: Does my suffering separate me from God's love?

A: In spite of how you may feel, no

Remember, no matter how severe the suffering, it has no power to sever your relationship with Christ. If God allows the suffering, it will be used to deepen and strengthen your relationship with Him.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:35-39).

Some would say that we should never quote from Romans 8 in the hearing of someone who is suffering, since it sounds trite and uncaring. Granted, it could be shared in a matter-of-fact "no big deal" manner, or interpreted so by emotions worn thin by pain. But the problem is not with the truth. The nurse may seem uncompassionate as she injects you with the antibiotic, but though the process is painful, what is injected is life-saving nonetheless. Take your eyes off the messenger for a moment, and gaze at the message of Romans 8 and find the lifesaving serum it contains.

Trouble... hardship... persecution... famine... nakedness... danger... sword... death... life... angels... demons... the present... the future... powers... height... depth... anything else... in all creation...

Every kind of suffering imaginable is included in this extensive list. And if anything was missed in the list, it is included in the phrase, "anything else in all creation." No one, no thing, nowhere, no how, now or ever can separate you from the love of God in Christ.

And the passage does not say God will prevent these various sufferings, but that ***"in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loves us."*** In them, including them, in spite of them, and in experiencing them we find more than victory through Christ who loves us always and ever the same.

Feelings are real. But feelings are not necessarily proof of facts. I may *feel* abandoned, yet be watched and cared for. I may not *feel* loved, and yet be loved deeply and sincerely with a loyal and unchanging love. I may *feel* anxious and afraid and not *feel* secure, yet be completely safe and protected. We must learn to be honest with our emotions, yet not enslaved to them. It is imperative to realize that emotions are the result of our assumptions.

It is imperative to realize that emotions are the result of our assumptions.

Emotions are a river flowing out of the reservoir of our thoughts. Emotions follow thoughts, like a beagle after a rabbit. Imagine this: you are in a hospital bed. You've spent three days having an entire battery of tests. The doctor comes into your room with his iPad in hand saying, "I'm very sorry, but the tests have confirmed you have stage four pancreatic cancer, and there is no curative treatment. The reality is that you have only a few weeks, or at best, a few months to live. Some of my staff will be along to discuss palliative care from here on out. Again, I'm so very sorry." He turns to leave; you are stunned. Your mind whirls... who to tell, what to tell, what to do next. You are flooded with emotions. You feel like you're outside looking in at somebody else's life. What's just happened? And then, the doctor comes right back into the room and apologetically states, "I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. I was scrolling through these tests and realized they weren't yours. Your tests came back completely clear. There is no cancer. It's apparently just indigestion and we'll treat it orally. You'll be discharged about noon." O.K., what are your emotions now? Relief? Joy? Why? You are still you. The only thing that changed was the information. Your emotions followed your thoughts. Your thoughts were based on what someone told you. So, who will you listen to in your suffering? That choice will make all the difference in the world. Listen to the One who never makes misdiagnoses and never leaves your side.

Q 15: What does God expect from me in my sufferings?

A: Trust and obedience

God's commands for me in my sufferings are many. When we first hear about God's commands and expectations for us when we suffer, it may seem cold and uncaring. But the reality is that God's commands are a treasure and blessing to us. We may be tempted to listen to the voice of self-pity whispering: *"Because you are suffering no one should put any expectations on you. You hurt so deeply that you can't be expected to respond appropriately."* While not voicing it, we may still feel that suffering temporarily absolves us from all responsibilities and gives us a pass to say, think, or do anything. But this is just not true. We are to be honest with our feelings, but also obedient in our decisions.

We are to be honest with our feelings, but also obedient in our decisions.

Here are clear commands to fellow sufferers from those who knew great suffering in their own lives. Endure. Keep going. Keep trusting. Keep following Christ.

*"**Endure** hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs-- he wants to **please his commanding officer**. Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he **competes according to the rules**. The **hardworking farmer** should be the first to receive a share of the crops. Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this. **Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David**. This*

*is my gospel, for which **I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal**. But God's word is not chained. Therefore **I endure everything for the sake of the elect**, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory” (2 Timothy 2:3-10).*

*“But you, **keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry**” (2 Timothy 4:5).*

Paul suffered greatly and endured. “Well, I’m no Apostle Paul” you say? Neither was Timothy. Neither am I. But the commands of Christ are not rationed according to our spiritual progress. They are intended to help us make progress. This first command is to **endure**. Endure the hardship with a trusting heart. Keep pleasing the Commander even though the battle rages and you may be wounded. Keep your head, endure hardship, do the next right thing. You don’t have to do everything, decide everything, or know everything right now. The key to pleasing Christ is to just make the next good decision, to take the next step in the right direction. Endure.

Be Patient. Stand Firm. Don’t Compare or Complain.

*James 5:8-11 “**You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy**” (James 5:8-11).* Suffering is no stranger to the people of God. It is an all-too-common and all-too-constant companion of saints. If the people of God in past ages could be patient and stand firm being human, then we today can take heart and do the same. Granted, they were not without their flaws and failures. But they stood firm, stood the test, and were rewarded for their obedience. That reward was bestowed partially in this life and fully in the next. You will receive your rewards as well.

“And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

“And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect” (Hebrews 10:32-40).

Be Armed with the Right Attitude

*“Therefore, **since Christ suffered** in his body, **arm yourselves also with the same attitude**, because he who has suffered in his body is **done with sin**. As a result, he does not **live the rest of his earthly life** for evil human desires, but rather **for the will of God**” (1 Peter 4:1-2).*

First Peter is all about present suffering and permanent glory yet to come. Peter knew what it was to fail Christ when faced with suffering for His name. But he also knew what it was to come back and stand for Christ as a martyr giving his life for the Savior. Peter instructs us to face the future with the armor of a right attitude as we enter the battle of suffering. This attitude says, “My Savior suffered. He calls me to follow. My life belongs to Him. Let Him do with me as He sees best. Just let me do His will to the end of the journey.” Attitude is everything. Perspective is priceless. Outlook is essential. Let’s take ours from Christ Himself.

*“**Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:** Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but **made himself nothing**, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, **he humbled himself and became obedient** to death-- even death on a cross! Therefore, **God exalted him** to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed-- not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence-- **continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Do everything without complaining or arguing...**” (Philippians 2:5-14).*

Commit Yourself Continually to Your Faithful God and Do the Right Thing

*“**So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good**” (1 Peter 4:19).*

If our suffering is included in God’s plan for us, then we can confidently lay our lives in His hands for His daily direction and obey Him. Suffering may tempt us to run away, harden our hearts, and go silent in our pain. This is disastrous. Make the hard choice. Make the right choice. Commit yourself to your faithful Creator and make the next good choice as you follow Him. “Trust and obey,” as the old hymn says, truly is the way to rest and peace.

Rely on the Promises of God

*“Remember your word to your servant, for you have given me hope. **My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life**” (Psalm 119:49-50). “Your word, O LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. Your faithfulness continues through all generations; you established the earth, and it endures.*

*Your laws endure to this day, for all things serve you. **If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction. I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have preserved my life***" (Psalm 119:89-93).

The Psalmist calls on God to keep His promises. He understands God's sovereignty over all creation and His faithfulness in all of life. Those promises and precepts are the wellspring of comfort in the desert of difficulties and the depression and discouragement they bring. God's promises preserve us. Read them. Speak them. Pray them. Sing them. They truly are the "comfort in my suffering." Appendix 2 contains many of these glorious promises for you to read and remember.

Choose to Trust the Father and the Son

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me" (John 14:1).

Many are the saints who in their sufferings listen to the tempter insinuate that a God who would allow such pain simply cannot be trusted. But the command of Christ is clear: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me."

Jesus just finished announcing to the disciples that He was leaving, they couldn't come with Him now, He was going to die, and they were going to desert Him. What horrible news! It is at this hour of great trouble that Jesus bids His disciples not to have troubled hearts. Here are two voices... two choices... two consequences. I can listen to Satan or to Jesus. The deceiver calls us to doubt. Jesus calls us to trust. The consequences are inevitable. I can choose a troubled heart or I can choose a trusting heart. We cannot choose to avoid the hard trouble. But we can choose not to let the "hard trouble" cause "heart trouble." We can have the trouble with a troubled heart, or we can have the trouble with a trusting heart. Jesus calls us to continued and ever-increasing trust in the midst of the trouble. Remember: doubt resists, trust submits; doubt questions, trust believes; doubt destroys, trust delivers; doubt is easy, trust is hard.

Pray, Think, Do

*"**Rejoice** in the Lord always. I will say it again: **Rejoice!** ~~5~~Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. **Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.** And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, **whatever is true**, whatever is **noble**, whatever is **right**, whatever is **pure**, whatever is **lovely**, whatever is **admirable**-- if anything is **excellent or praiseworthy**-- **think about such things.** **Whatever** you have **learned** or **received** or **heard from me, or seen in me**-- **put it into practice.** And the God of peace will be with you"* (Philippians 4:4-9).

These seemingly impossible commands (rejoice... do not be anxious... present requests with thanksgiving... think... practice...) were written by a man in a prison cell, robbed of his freedom, and facing incessant and ever-increasing trouble. His encouragement is even greater when viewed in that

light. We are called to pray (ask and trust), be thankful (count blessings even when carrying burdens), think truth (focus on the good), and keep doing life Paul's way (which is Jesus' way.) The commands are simple but the doing is hard; hard, yes, but not impossible. Start with continual prayer, stay focused on the good, and keep doing the right. I remember Elisabeth Elliot, a wise woman of God who suffered much, saying on the radio: "Ninety-five percent of the will of God is just doing the next thing that ought to be done with the right heart attitude." Good counsel and good insight for us all.

Q 16 Will my suffering ever end?

A: If you are a believer in Christ Jesus, yes

*"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and **he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.**' He who was seated on the throne said, '**I am making everything new!**' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.' He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from **the spring of the water of life.** He who overcomes will **inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son**'" (Revelation 21:1-7).*

While we still live in the "old order of things" in a world ruined by sin and cursed with its consequences, we as believers are looking ahead to the end of the story. We look not at the loss of all things in the destruction of the entire creation, but at the restoration of all things in a new creation, a new city, and a glorious and eternal "all things new" inheritance purchased by Christ's blood, prepared by His resurrection and ascension, preserved by His promise, and guaranteed by His Spirit. What we are about to survey is not potential, but decreed; not optional, but definite; not possible, but actual; not too good to be true, but good beyond measure and true beyond contradiction. Let's contemplate this *"inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, fading not away, reserved in heaven for us"* (1 Peter 1:4-5).

The Bible's message in a single word is **restoration**. Revelation chapters 21-22 show the full, final and eternal restoration of all that sin ruined in the Garden. These two final chapters of the Bible are worthy of memorization and meditation. Consider the sufferings removed in these promises - physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual.

Restored Creation: New Heavens and Earth – The promise is that the new heavens and earth will be immediately complete in one eternal day, rather than a progressive creation over six days; and the new

heavens and earth will not be formed out of water – as there are no oceans in this new creation, unlike the old world which included seas later used to destroy the world in judgment (Revelation 21:1).

Restored City: New Jerusalem - The old Jerusalem was built ~~up~~ by man, became the city of God's presence and name, but was defiled by sin and destroyed in judgment. The New Jerusalem is made by God, not man; comes down out of heaven, not built up from earth; and is the perfectly pure place of God's name, presence and glory forever (Revelation 21:2).

Restored Presence: God is now, at last and forever, dwelling with His redeemed people. What sin ruined in Eden resulting in separation and alienation, grace has restored in face-to-face reconciliation, with the drying of every tear, and the removal of death, mourning, crying and pain (Revelation 21:3-5).

Restored Satisfaction: Sin resulted in sweat, thirst, frustration and eventual death. Now we inherit the river of the water of life with its eternal quenching of every thirst created by our rebellion in Eden (Revelation 21:6-7).

Restored Peace: Only the redeemed are in the New Jerusalem. All those who lived and died in rebellion and enmity with the Seed of the woman are banished to the isolation they chose. The New Creation and the New City are inhabited only by those made new in Christ (Revelation 21:8).

Restored Israel: The New Jerusalem has twelve gates named for the 12 tribes of Israel, reminding us of the 12 tribes encircling the tabernacle in Numbers 2. The tribes are now represented *in* the city, not separated by courtyard and veils. Here is invitation and full access into the presence of God for all (Revelation 21:9-13).

Restored Nations: The foundations are named for the 12 apostles who were sent to all nations. Those of every nation now redeemed are one with the redeemed of Israel in one glorious dwelling place of God and man, reconciled forever with each other and with their God. As the nations were divided at Babel by rebellion, now they are united in Christ in the New City of God (Revelation 21:14).

Restored Sanctuary: The New Jerusalem is described as a 1,500 mile cube. The cubic nature of the city (same dimensions long, wide and high) takes us immediately to the description of the most holy place in the tabernacle, the holy of holies, the place of God's presence. As the New Jerusalem is the dwelling place of God's manifest presence, so it is a holy of holies vast beyond imagination inhabited by a company beyond number. Note also that the angel used "man's measurements" to assure us that this is real, solid, and actual in its immensity. (Or should we say: "Immense-City"?!) (Rev 21:15-21)

Restored Worship: The New Jerusalem does not have a separate temple like the old city. The temple allowed for God's presence among a sinful people, with lines of division forbidding passage. These locations separated Gentiles from Jews, Jews from priests, priests from the high priest, and God from

His people. All that separation is gone! There is no temple for God's presence with walls of sanctified separation. The Lord God and the Lamb are its temple, dwelling among His people. The revered place has been superseded with restored Presence! All is reconciled. Worship is unified, personal, intimate, continual, and universal (Revelation 21:22).

Restored Illumination: The old creation with its limited lights for the day and night (sun, moon, lamps) are replaced with the continual, uninterrupted, uncreated, never-changing glory of God's presence. The lights have been replaced with the restored Presence of the Creator and Redeemer, Father and Son. Because this glory is unending and unebbing, there is no night there! (Revelation 21:23)

Restored Image Bearers: Sin ruined man's role as the image bearer of God. Man lost his dominion, his royal position, and his glorious true representation as God's likeness on earth. That image was ruined as man continued to rebel, leading to a division in worship (Cain offering unacceptable sacrifice) a division in family (Cain killing Abel) and a division of nations (Babel). But now, the image is restored, the royal position of dominion is restored, and the nations are finally and truly united in the worship of their one true God and Savior, reigning with Him forever (Revelation 21:24-27; 22:3-5).

Restored Eden: The description of the New Jerusalem now turns us back to Eden with the mention of ever-open gates into the Presence of God. This then leads us to the river of the water of life (as Eden had a river), the tree of life, healing of nations, and the curse being forever removed (Revelation 22:1-3).

Restored Harmony: God's throne is in the city, and His servants serve Him with delight and devotion, marked with His name and beholding His face. There is no more rebellion. Everyone bows the knee, bears the Name, serves the King, sees His face, and reigns with Him (Revelation 22:3-4).

Restored Continuity: There is no more night that hides, confuses or darkens the vision of our Savior's face. The joys and blessings of our inheritance are unending. It is one eternal, unending, unceasing, uninterrupted face-to-face delight with our God in His unveiled glory! (Revelation 22:5)

What is missing in that glorious restoration?

Suffering separation from God's presence - gone.

Suffering's tears - gone.

Suffering of death - gone.

Suffering loneliness and mourning the death of others - gone.

Suffering's crying and pain - gone.

Suffering thirst, emptiness, isolation, loss, banishment, alienation - gone.

Suffering in its every form - gone! All, always, and forever gone!

It is in the face of this eternal glory that Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, *“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though **outwardly we are wasting away**, yet **inwardly we are being renewed day by day**. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an **eternal glory** that far outweighs them all. So we **fix our eyes** not on what is seen, but **on what is unseen**. For what is seen is temporary, but **what is unseen is eternal**.”*

Paul in his writings did not minimize or trivialize the reality of suffering, either his or yours. A quick read of the whole letter of 2 Corinthians makes that clear. Rather, he calls us to see beyond today’s dark night of suffering into tomorrow’s invisible, but endless day. The certainty that my suffering will not last, but heaven will, makes today’s burdens bearable.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) Describe a time that God seemed distant in your suffering. How did you get through it? How did you combat the lie that He had forsaken you?
- 2) Do you generally have a fact-based or feeling-based perspective? What are the pros and cons of this?
- 3) Which of the command passages for suffering saints in Question 15 are most needed by you right now? Explain why.
- 4) As you read Revelation 21-22, what promises of restoration are most precious to you? Why are they so special at this time?

“Lord, You have said nothing can separate me from Your love. I know this is truth. But You also know how lonely, how isolated, how empty I can feel. Please draw near and grant me the renewed inner witness of Your Spirit to give me peace in the midst of this storm. I am so thankful that this suffering is only for a season, and not endless. I long to do what will bring You glory now. Show me how to endure this season in a way that truly honors You and brings good into my life and the lives of my fellow sufferers. I pray in Your faithful name. Amen.”

Chapter 7

Q 17: Will God reveal to me the reasons behind my suffering?

A: Maybe, maybe not. Maybe you really don't want to know.

God has reasons for all that He does or allows. We see only the immediate, when God has greater reasons stretching on for years or even centuries. We are given specific reasons in Scripture for human suffering only in the rarest of cases, such as Adam (judgment on sin), Job (God is worshipped for His worth, not just His blessings), Joseph (to preserve the Jews and multitudes of others), and Jesus (to rescue sinners and reconcile them to a holy God.) When we look for God's specific purposes in our own sufferings we can go only as far as Scripture goes. Some seek to answer this question by referencing the book of Job. Here are a few observations in that regard.

- 1) God has a reason and purpose in allowing Job's suffering.
- 2) Satan's accusations and God's purpose remain hidden from Job.
- 3) God's purpose continues to remain hidden even when God appeared to Job in the whirlwind. God does not disclose His reasons, but rather emphasizes Job's lack of knowledge and God's complete wisdom with a multitude of questions, humbling him into silence.
- 4) The end of the book of Job is written by someone who outlived Job and shares the summary of God's blessings upon him in the decades following his great sufferings.
- 5) Was Job the author, or was it an unnamed prophet who narrated it at a later time? If the narrator who writes the introduction and the end of the last chapter wrote the entire book, then there is no certainty that Job ever knew the reasons during his lifetime.
- 6) If God did reveal the information in the first two chapters to Job, would it have helped? Think about it. Job lost his family, health and friends *so angels could see* that Satan's slander of God and Job were a lie. It was *to prove to angels* that God is worthy of worship even when every known blessing has vanished. God knew that truth before and without Job's suffering. Would it help you to know you've endured such misery so you could be the subject of a spiritual contest watched by angels and instigated by Satan? I'm not sure it would help me! But it does help me to know that there are hidden reasons for all that God does or allows and those reasons are centered in God's worthiness. God's worthiness is always reason enough for anything He does or allows. And in that sense, every test and trial we face is always about God's worthiness. My responses in all of life declare my belief that God is worthy if I obey, or that I believe He is untrustworthy if I sin. We really don't need more specific information than that, and if we got it I'm not sure it would help us more than this does.

God did disclose the secrets behind Job's sufferings to *us* in the Scriptures. To know God does have a reason and a purpose in allowing suffering is a great comfort in itself. We too may have greater revelations in eternity regarding God's all-encompassing purposes in our sufferings. But for now this is hidden to us, as it was to Job, in God's counsels. We cannot speak with certainty about what God will

tell us in the future, except to say that if it matters, He will. And who is to say we will even want to know on that day?

Q 18: What are common dangers and temptations for those who suffer?

Answer: Envy, bitterness and isolation

It is extremely important that we understand that our suffering is not only difficult, but it is dangerous. The experience of suffering provides not only great opportunities to grow and show our faith, but also poses great dangers to our spiritual health if we listen to the lies of Satan and harden our hearts. Beware of listening to the father of lies and his destructive suggestions in your afflictions.

THE DANGER OF ENVY AND BITTERNESS BY WAY OF SATAN'S WHISPERS

- 1) "See all those people? They aren't lonely. People care about them. See how they get hugs? See how they get the arm around the shoulder? See how people stop to talk to them?"
- 2) "If they cared, they'd stop and ask you what's wrong. They don't really care." "Nobody cares about you. So why should you care about them?"
- 3) "See how that person just walked past and never even noticed you? Do you think you matter? Forget it. Watch this next person coming by, she won't stop either."
- 4) "Oh, they talk about love, but where is it when you need it? Can't they see you're hurting?"
- 5) "You come alone, you sit alone, you leave alone. They come with friends, they sit with friends, they talk with friends, they laugh with friends, they leave with friends. You just don't belong here."
- 6) "Why bother talking about it? Talking won't change anything. Why pray? Prayer hasn't helped."
- 7) "Why are all these people healthy and I'm so sick? Why are they happy when I'm depressed? Why are they so connected and I'm so alone? Why do they get a free pass in life and I get stuck with the bills? It's not fair."
- 8) "Everybody goes on with life like nothing's changed! Everything's changed. It will never be the same. How can they laugh? How can they talk about trivial stuff? How can they play games and tell jokes when my heart is breaking?"

THE DANGER OF ISOLATION AND SATAN'S WHISPERS DRIVING YOU AWAY

- 1) "You aren't doing so well with your faith, are you? You don't feel close to God. If you go to church today, you'd just be a hypocrite."
- 2) "You're struggling so bad that if you opened up and told anybody, they would be shocked. You'd probably just make them doubt God and make a mess of their lives, too. You'd better just stay away."
- 3) "Nobody knows or cares about you. If they really cared they'd come to see you, or ask, or reach out a whole lot more than they do."
- 4) "Church is just so surface, so fake. Everybody sings and smiles and nods. Don't put yourself through it. You can't take it this morning."

These are just some of the thoughts and emotions that suffering people face. It's a hard reality that when your life is a train wreck of suffering, other people still drive by and go on with life. It's not that they are heartless and cruel, though you may choose to see it that way. They have their own lives to live. They have their own burdens to bear. Everyone will not stop and help. Think of all the suffering people you've never reached out to or stopped to help. Most of us are not well connected to very many people. And even those you are connected to may not know the depth of the pain you're dealing with. To project your assumptions on them is unfair. Most of them would never think of doing or saying anything that would cause you such pain, if they knew what was happening in your heart. They don't. And they won't unless you let them into your secret struggle.

Satan has a lot more lies than these, but they are representative enough to prove the point that one thing Satan doesn't want you to do is to get among God's people to worship God, hear His truth, and be honest with others about the depth of your struggles. The temptation to isolation, envy and bitterness in your suffering is real. Fight it! As long as your struggle stays hidden, you stay stuck! That's one of the reasons we are told in Hebrews 10:23-25, *"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching."*

Worship

You need to gather with God's people to worship even when you don't feel like it. Sometimes that is the most sincere form of worship and love for God... to give Him thanks like Job with a broken and burdened heart.

Small Group Support

You need to get together with a few godly people who know how to listen. You need to get together with a few godly people who know how to pray. You need to get together with a few godly people who know the Scriptures and will share them with you in your situation compassionately, tenderly, and well. If you don't know who to ask to be in that group, talk to your pastor or the godliest believer you know and ask them to help you get a small group of others to gather around you for at least an hour a week for the next few months. This will make a huge difference as you talk, pray and share the burden with others. God commands it!

Galatians 6:2 "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

Counsel

When seeking professional counseling, try to find a biblical counselor who is both strong in the Word of God and well-skilled in assisting others through real and definite life change. The amount of time and money that is spent on professional counseling can be significant. If you are paying for counseling, be

sure you are getting clear, useful, biblical counsel and not just a listening ear and sympathy. Seek recommendations from pastors and ask for references. Do your homework first.

Involvement

Staying involved in a ministry in the midst of your suffering is important. It may seem that your suffering has sapped all your strength and you just don't have anything to give to anyone else. You may not be able to do much, but you can do *something* to serve others. Seeing others and not just yourself is so important. Jesus in His sufferings interceded for those who were murdering Him. He comforted the thief who turned in faith to Him. He made provision for His mother to be cared for by John. I know you and I are not perfect like Jesus, but we are to learn from Him and follow in His steps. And the fruit of serving in our suffering will often be the lightening of our own burdens.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) Has the book of Job has been helpful to you in your seasons of suffering? If so, what has been especially helpful, and why?
- 2) Have you struggled with envy, bitterness or isolation in your seasons of suffering? Which of the three has been the hardest to overcome? What has helped you overcome ~~them~~?
- 3) Which of Satan's lies have been the strongest and most frequent in your seasons of suffering? How have you fought them and overcome them? Are any of them still a constant battle for you?

"Lord, You have good and holy reasons in all You do and allow. I know that. The Bible states it. The cross shouts it. My heart knows it. But the whispers of the tempter seep through in the silent times of sorrow. Give me an ear to hear Your voice. Give me a will that stands strong in Your truth. Give me overcoming strength that endures and perseveres in believing. Give me a Job-like faith that says "though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him." Lead me to good and godly friends who can help me with this burden. Give me the courage and humility to be honest in this struggle. And direct me to see how I can help someone else today who needs the same comfort I do. I pray in the name of Jesus, the One who, while suffering beyond measure, kept reaching out in spite of hands nailed to the cross, to care for those around Him. Amen."

Q 19: Can anything good ever come out of all this suffering?

A: Much more than you would ever expect. That's the next part of our study.

PART 2 GETTING THE MOST FROM WHAT WE LIKE THE LEAST: SUFFERING

In this second part of our study, we will focus on the benefits that can come in a believer's life from suffering. Though we do not know all of God's particular purposes for your garden of suffering, His Word does reveal many good things that can grow and be reaped from it. These fruits will not all grow at the same time, or in the same way. Some are bitter at the beginning but sweet at the end. Some are simple and obvious, others not so. It is unlikely you would have read this far if you were not committed to growing in Christ, so it is with confidence that we'll turn our attention towards discovering and getting the most from what we like the least...suffering.

Chapter 8

1) Suffering is an X-Ray, Revealing the Heart *Job*

Many are the hidden strengths and the hidden sins in the hearts of men. Suffering exposes both.

Hidden Strength: Real, Growing Faith

"At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.' In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing" (Job 1:20-22).

Job was prosperous and blessed. He might have been proud. He might have been self-congratulatory. His faith might have been a façade. But the incredible suffering revealed to Job himself, his wife, Satan and angels, what God already knew: his faith was real, pure and strong. And it only got stronger and purer as time went on. *Job 13:15 "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him..." (Job 13:15). Job 19:25-27 "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes-- I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" (Job 19:25-27)*

Hidden Sin: Envy and Bitterness

*"A psalm of Asaph. Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For **I envied** the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (Psalm 73:1-3).*

*Psalm 73:13, 21-22 "Surely **in vain have I kept my heart pure**; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. When my heart was grieved and **my spirit embittered**, I was **senseless and ignorant**; I was **a brute beast before you**" (Psalm 73:13, 21-22).*

Suffering provides insights into our own hearts like little else does. Suffering moves us past the surface and into the soul. Look deep as you examine your own heart. Job did, and retained a clear conscience. Asaph did and repented, gaining a whole new perspective. Either way, the ultimate result was positive and powerful.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) What hidden sins in your own heart came to the surface in your suffering that surprised you and caused you to seek His forgiveness and grace?
- 2) What internal strengths of soul did God reveal you possessed that you never really knew were there until you found yourself in the midst of suffering?

“Lord, You know my heart. Show me what You see. If this pain must continue, then let my heart be purified and made strong. I want You more than I want relief. I need You more than I need relief. Do in me all You desire, and show me my heart today.”

2) Suffering is a Telescope, Bringing Eternity Near *Psalm 73*

Let’s walk through Psalm 73 together and see the progression in Asaph’s life from early envy, frustration, bitterness and isolation to eventual revelation, rebuke, repentance, and restoration.

PSALM 73

DECLARATION - Verse 1

Introductory statement of faith and fact. Asaph wants to be clear at the outset concerning God’s character and worth, before he launches into his personal diatribe of frustration with God.

“A psalm of Asaph. Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart” (Psalm 73:1).

OBSERVATION - Verses 2-12

Confession of his own envy and bitterness. Asaph nearly walks away from God and rejects his faith in the face of his mounting frustration with God’s apparent unfairness in blessing the wicked and bringing ever-increasing misery to him as he tries to walk in obedience to God.

But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.

For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.

They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills.

Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence.

From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.

They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression.

Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth.

*Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance.
They say, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?"
This is what the wicked are like-- always carefree, they increase in wealth.*

FRUSTRATION - Verses 13-16

Frustrated and angry, confused and outraged, Asaph asks, "What's the point in doing right when things only go wrong?" We can almost hear him say, "Look, I tried obeying God and it just didn't work! I did the right. I confessed all known sin. I tried to do everything God's way and what did it get me? Just more misery! Why bother anymore? And I can't tell anyone else what I'm thinking, or it would destroy them too." He is at the edge, and ready to jump over the cliff of despair.

*Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.
All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning.
If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed your children.
When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me...*

TRANSFORMATION - Verses 17-26

He enters the temple and listens to the reading of Scripture and he gets an eternal perspective on life and suffering. He considers what God says will happen to the prosperous wicked at death, and what will happen to suffering saints at death. Verses 17-20 reveal the destiny of the wicked no matter how much they possess, how long they live, or how good they have it. Hell is real and eternal. And Asaph is no longer frustrated and envious. Let them have their few days of sunshine. It's all they'll ever have.

*...till I entered the sanctuary of God; then **I understood their final destiny.**
Surely you place them on slippery ground; you **cast them down** to ruin.
How suddenly are they **destroyed**, completely **swept away** by terrors!
As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will **despise them** as fantasies.*

Asaph is now ashamed of his envy and bitter outrage with God. And he is even more humbled by the recognition that even at his lowest point, God did not leave him. When he let go of God, God still held on to him. God would guide him with His truth and soon the sufferings would end and he would be home in glory. Now that eternity captured his heart, all those former things that seemed so important didn't matter at all. He moved from wanting all the good things the wicked enjoyed on earth to being able to confess, "Earth has nothing I desire besides you." It was suffering combined with Scripture that God used to bring him to the point of this marvelous heart change. The hope of heaven comes near and becomes clear in our suffering.

*When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered,
I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.
Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.*

*You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

CONCLUSION - Verses 27-28

*Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.
But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of
all your deeds.*

Asaph has a renewed and firmer faith and he has a personal story to tell. The 73rd psalm is that story. What story can you tell of lessons learned from the suffering assigned to you?

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) Summarize the steps that Asaph went through in his psalm and compare it to your own experience.
- 2) How long does it take to get through these steps? Can you describe an experience in which you worked through them rapidly? Can you describe an experience in which the time it took for you to work through them has been really long? Have you experienced this same struggle repeatedly in a single season of suffering?

“Lord, reading Psalm 73 is like looking into a mirror. I never had such a struggle before this pain came. Yet, if it has taught me anything, it’s taught me how to long for heaven. I am coming to see that this life was never meant to satisfy all my desires. You alone are the source and satisfaction of every pure desire in my heart. And I long for more than just the relief from all this pain. Do in my heart what You did in Asaph’s so I can pray with holy fervor: ‘Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides You.’”

Chapter 9

3) Suffering is a Kiln, Purifying Our Faith *James 1*

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4).

James uses a financial accounting term as he teaches us about trials (difficulties, suffering); mark it down in the “pure joy” column! It is as though we are developing a budget and writing down our assets and liabilities. We are commanded to mark trials down as an asset to rejoice in. Really? Yes, really. Why? Not because they are joy-producing in itself, but because of what trials can potentially produce. Fire is hot. Fire hurts. Fire can destroy. But fire can also purify. That’s the point. Suffering purifies faith by producing perseverance that leads to full spiritual maturity in the believer’s life. It takes a hot fire to burn away dross. And suffering is the fire of God focused on purifying our faith.

Keep going. You’re still growing. Every day provides proof of perseverance and growth. You’re still here. You still believe. You’re still walking by faith. The suffering may be hotter, but the faith is proved more genuine the hotter the flame becomes.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) Can you connect the dots between your seasons of suffering and a purer faith that relies on God regardless of the outcome?
- 2) Will you thank God today for specific suffering that God has used to give you a purer, more genuine and submissive faith in your God? That is one way of “counting it joy.”

“Lord, I want to put all this pain in the joy column, but it’s hard. This pain that You’ve ordained to purify my faith seems more often to poison it. Sometimes I just want to die and be done with it all. But then I realize that this is Satan’s voice, not Yours. You said pain produces perseverance. The fact that I’m still praying to You proves your point, doesn’t it? O.K., Lord. I’ll do it. It sounds impossible, but if You make me strong enough to keep going, then I’ll keep marking it down in the joy column, one more time.”

4) Suffering is a Compass - Pointing us to Full Reliance On God *Psalms 62*

Self-reliance is our default way of living life. We tend to walk in a “God and” mode, rather than a “God alone” mode. We trust “God and our feelings,” “God and our past experience,” “God and our own resources.” Suffering awakens us to our need to rely fully on God, and God alone.

Years ago I was turkey hunting in the mountains of north central Pennsylvania. I had never hunted the area before, but knew the ridge generally ran east to west. As I hiked over and around ridges a storm blew in fast, and I was completely enveloped in blanketing fog in a matter of minutes. I continued walking slowly until I came to the point of a ridge and had to head down either to the right or the left. I

felt strongly I needed to go left. As I stood there, I realized that if I made the wrong choice, I could walk for 30 miles before crossing another road. I had become really disoriented. But then I remembered the compass that was tied inside my hunting vest. I pulled it out and discovered that the way that “felt right” was wrong! I trusted the compass, not my strong feelings. As a young teen I learned the hard way that trusting your feelings instead of the compass was foolish, as back then it cost me an entire day, great fear, and many needless miles! So, I now relied completely on the compass. And descending the ridge out of the fog I saw the road far, far below where I had left my car hours before. Like the fog, suffering brings me up short and reminds me I cannot navigate this life safely based on my feelings. I need reliable direction and this comes from full reliance on my God and His Word.

Psalm 62:1-12

THE DECLARATION OF GOD ALONE AS THE SOURCE OF REST, STABILITY, SALVATION, AND CONFIDENCE

My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him.

He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.

THE OBSERVATION THAT MAN IS WEAK, EASILY DEFEATED, DECEPTIVE & CRUEL

How long will you assault a man? Would all of you throw him down-- this leaning wall, this tottering fence? They fully intend to topple him from his lofty place; they take delight in lies. With their mouths they bless, but in their hearts they curse. Selah.

THE EXHORTATION TO TRUST NOT MEN OR MONEY, BUT GOD ALONE

Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him.

He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.

My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge.

Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge. <Selah>

Lowborn men are but a breath, the highborn are but a lie; if weighed on a balance, they are nothing; together they are only a breath. Do not trust in extortion or take pride in stolen goods; though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) What are the most common “ands” in your life that you tend to reach for and rely on rather than God alone?
- 2) How has suffering shown you your “ands” and the futility of relying on anything other than God?
- 3) Have you turned from the “ands” without bitterness and disappointment, embracing Your God as fully sufficient for your soul’s deepest needs?

Lord, this pain is like a fog surrounding my soul. I can't see where it's taking me. I don't know what to do. No matter what I've tried, nothing helps. Is that why You've let it go on? Is it because there isn't any help to be found, except in You? Then no matter what happens Lord, I will trust You. This pain, take it or leave it, I will trust You, Lord. You alone are my Rock. You, O Lord, and You alone."

Chapter 10

5) Suffering is a Demolition Crew Destroying Self-Confidence

*"We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about **the hardships we suffered** in the province of Asia. We were **under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure**, so that **we despaired** even of life. Indeed, **in our hearts we felt** the sentence of death. But **this happened that we might not rely on ourselves** but on God, who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:8-9).*

Suffering destroys all self-confidence. (*"this happened that we might not rely on ourselves."*) The greater the suffering, the more complete the demolition of self-confidence. This is not a bad thing. This is a good thing. This is reality. God has always been the only true and unfailing Rock on which we are to trust. We just saw in Psalm 62 that we, in and of ourselves, are "tottering fences", "leaning walls", a "breath" and "nothing!" God is the only bedrock on which to build our faith. His character, His promise and His sovereignty will stand the full weight of you and your burdens. Let your grief and suffering, your pain and loss sweep away the rubble of self-confidence so you can rest on God alone.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) Has self-confidence been a road block in your life to really trusting God for today? How have you seen the sin of self-reliance revealed in your reactions to suffering?
- 2) Have you found a place of confidence and rest in God in your soul since your suffering destroyed your self-reliant spirit?

*"Lord, if this season of suffering has taught me anything, it has taught me that I cannot do life without You. I am so frail, so weak, so full of doubt. The enemy of my soul is without and the enemy of my own flesh is within. I can feel what Paul meant when he cried out: 'I know that in me, that is in my flesh, dwells no good thing....Oh wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me...'
You alone, O God, You alone!"*

6) Suffering is a Construction Crew Fitting, Strengthening, Settling us in God

"And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Peter 5:10-11).

The Petrine doxology offered as the benediction closing his first letter is focused on the good we can get out of suffering. Peter's entire first letter is focused on two key concepts: suffering and glory; suffering that is difficult, temporary and purposeful, and glory that is sweet, permanent and to the praise of God. This suffering and glory are shared between Jesus and the believer. So it makes perfect sense that his letter should end with these same two words.

"The God of all grace" - He is the source of the grace that is needed in and works through our suffering.
*"Who called you to His eternal **glory**"* - We are called by God to inherit soon His everlasting glory (1:3-5).
*"after you have **suffered** a while"* - Our suffering is real, comes before the benefits, and is temporary.
"will himself restore you" - God Himself uses suffering to make adjustments in us, to fit and frame us.
"and make you strong" - God uses suffering to make us vigorous and resilient.
"make you firm" - God uses suffering to set us firmly in place, and to make us solid and strong to bear the weight.
"make you steadfast" - God uses our suffering to pack the ground firmly around us so we won't move or slide out of place.

The words Peter used describe the fashioning, raising, securing and firming up a pillar for a temple. This takes us back to 1 Peter 2:5: *"you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house."* Peter is telling us that God intends, as we move through suffering this side of glory, to use it to build us into strong, well made, vigorous and stable pillars in God's house. The same analogy is found in the following words of Jesus to the suffering saints in Philadelphia in Revelation 3:11-12: *"I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name."*

We will not be overcome by our suffering or by the enemies who deceive and destroy. We will overcome it and them. Like any construction project, the work in building us is a noisy and messy process. But don't forget, in this eternal building project, the Supplier is the God of all grace, the Architect is the Son of God, the Carpenter is the Holy Spirit, and they always finish what they start! (Hebrews 12:1-2, Philippians 1:6) He is constructing us into living temples of the living God bearing God's name, the name of the New Jerusalem, and the new name of Jesus Himself. Bearing the name indicates ownership and approval; it is God's signature on His finished product! Suffering is the tool of the Almighty in fashioning His treasure into its final and glorious form.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) How are you different now than you were before your seasons of suffering? In what ways are you stronger? In what ways are you more settled and secure?
- 2) How has your season of suffering fit and shaped you to be a better worshipper of God?

“Lord God, maker of heaven and earth, You made all things out of nothing by the power of Your word. As you took the rib out of Adam’s side to fashion a bride for him, so too, take this pain and suffering you have given to me and use it to shape and fashion me more fully into Your image. I believe Your purpose is good and the result will be good. ‘Stamp Thine own image deep on my heart.’ In Your name I pray and find refuge. Amen.”

Chapter 11

7) Suffering is a Drill, Carving Out a Deep Emptiness for Grace to Fill 2

Corinthians

“For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows” (2 Corinthians 1:5).

“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.

“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

Suffering often creates a deep, inner emptiness of soul. Like a drill carving its way through rock, the deeper it goes the darker it gets, the more emptiness is left. We can get lost in the emptiness, seeing only the darkness, or we can believe the truth that God is allowing the suffering to create the empty place so He can fill it and transform it into reservoir of grace. By grace, God’s power is made fully complete in our weakness. By grace, God’s comfort will fill the empty place our suffering has made.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) Describe the soul emptying effect of suffering in your life?
- 2) How has God used suffering to pour even greater grace into your life than before?

“Lord, I cannot do life without You. There may have been days when I thought I could. But in this season of suffering You have shown me the folly and arrogance of doing life on my own. This season of suffering has emptied me of self-confidence, self-sufficiency, self-reliance. If you do not fill me, I will not be filled. Come in Your fullness, O Well of Living Water. Fill me with You, today. I pray in the Name of Him Who is Fullness of God in bodily form, my Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.”

8) Suffering is a Well, Providing a Reservoir of Comfort for Others 2

Corinthians 1

*“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the **Father of compassion** and the **God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer**” (2 Corinthians 1:3-6).*

Suffering is the drill and suffering is also the empty place it created. Suffering is the reservoir for grace to flow so you can pass it on to others. Paul makes it clear that we do not suffer alone nor do we suffer for our sakes alone. My suffering is bigger than me. (Oh, how Job suffered, and oh, how many millions are given grace and comfort through his story, thousands of years after the fact!) Because you have suffered, you can serve as a minister of comfort through it. Suffering tenderizes the heart, making us more compassionate than before. Suffering opens the eyes to see the needs of others. Suffering teaches the mouth to say the words that helped you when you were in the midst of suffering. Oh, how deep the well of comfort God has made in your soul through suffering so that you can sympathize, share in, and bear the burden for others in their suffering! Your suffering is not a wasted pain to just get through. It is a life-giving well designed to bring blessing to others for the rest of your life.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) How has your suffering made you far better able to care for others and pour grace into their lives?
- 2) Who has been a fellow sufferer who has overflowed grace into your life through the grace they received in their suffering?
- 3) Who is in a season of suffering and needs the overflow of your comfort today? How will you reach out to them? Who will you take with you to add to the overflow?

“Lord Jesus, through this season of suffering You have opened my eyes to those who suffer around me. I never saw it so clearly until now. I know You have comforted me, not as an end of itself, but as a means to a greater end. Help me share the treasures of Your Word and grace that have so helped me endure my sufferings. And when this season of suffering is over, keep me awake and aware to the needs of those who still are suffering around me. I pray in Your name, O Helper of the helpless, Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Chapter 12

9) Suffering is a Key, Opening Doors of Ministry to Others 2 Samuel, Philippians

Here are two striking examples of how suffering became a key, opening doors of ministry that would have otherwise remained locked. The first example is a hidden jewel in the life of David. The second is in the life of Paul.

DAVID

“So the king set out, with all the people following him, and they halted at a place some distance away. All his men marched past him, along with all the Kerethites and Pelethites; and all the six hundred Gittites who had accompanied him from Gath marched before the king. The king said to Ittai the Gittite, ‘Why should you come along with us? Go back and stay with King Absalom. You are a foreigner, an exile from your homeland. You came only yesterday. And today shall I make you wander about with us, when I do not know where I am going? Go back, and take your countrymen. May kindness and faithfulness be with you.’ But Ittai replied to the king, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king may be, whether it means life or death, there will your servant be.’ David said to Ittai, ‘Go ahead, march on.’ So Ittai the Gittite marched on with all his men and the families that were with him” (2 Samuel 15:17-22).

As you recall, David began as a shepherd boy with his father’s flocks. Then he progressed to a palace musician. Later he became a warrior and leader of Israel’s armies. From that privileged position David found himself a fugitive from Saul in the land of the Philistines. That time of exile lasted 10 years! Think of it. David was cut off from his people, alone in enemy territory. He was the object of an incessant effort to kill him by the very king he honored and protected, Saul. The account above in 2 Samuel 15:17-22 records David fleeing from Jerusalem decades later during the rebellion of his son Absalom. As David left Jerusalem this large contingent of men led by a man named Ittai swore by Jehovah to be loyal to David and give their lives in battle to protect him. Stop for just a minute and look at this more closely. *“Gittites...from Gath...”* These were Philistines. These were former Philistine idol worshippers from the city of Gath. Does that town ring a bell in your memory? *“Goliath from Gath...”* (1 Samuel 17:4) Put two and two together. David kills Goliath in the name of Israel’s God. David years later, comes to live in Philistia, suffering a decade of exile and misery running from Saul. But during that decade of suffering he became a light for the true and living God among the Philistines. These men and their families in Gath, remembering how their idol-worshipping hero was defeated by the boy David and Israel’s God, turned to Jehovah and followed David back to Jerusalem to live. David’s suffering was used to bring hundreds of families to faith. His exile was their home-coming! His closed door to Judah was their open door to salvation. His decade of suffering was the key to their everlasting joy.

PAUL

“Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly” (Philippians 1:12-14).

This second passage written by Paul in Philippians 1 teaches us an identical lesson. Paul reminds the believers in Philippi that his imprisonment, exile and suffering has *“really served to advance the gospel.”* The palace guard were unreachable by ordinary believers in the outside world. God used Paul’s suffering. His locked prison doors were actually open doors to make the gospel known to these men. What others would call a disaster, Paul labeled an opportunity. What we would call a waste, Paul called an encouragement for brave witness by other believers. What others might call a tragedy, we must call a treasure, since in that season of suffering in the prison came the inspired letters of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. If Paul had been free, he might have visited these churches and told them these truths, rather than have written them down. Just think, how many books of the Bible were written in the context of the suffering of the writer? The only one that I can think of that was not is Song of Solomon!

In that sense, we owe our precious Bible to the God who uses suffering as a key to open doors of ministry.

While we see this truth in the lives of David and Paul, are we willing to walk by faith and believe that God will also use our suffering as a key to open doors of ministry?

A friend of mine named Charlie came to faith in Christ at about 30 years of age. He became a bold witness. Many came to faith in Christ as a result of his testimony as he took them to church and Bible studies led by others. His later years were troubled by many health issues that finally resulted in a life-threatening heart condition. His remaining days on this earth were short. Only one thing troubled Charlie. He had never personally led anyone in that moment of decision to trust Christ as Savior. He prayed more fervently than ever that God would give him the joy of leading just one person to Christ before he died. In his last hospitalization, as was his custom, he would ask the nurses, the cleaning staff, and the doctors when he met them, if they had ever been born again. One young nurse said she had heard of it, but didn’t have any idea what it meant. Over the next three days Charlie spent time explaining the gospel to her as she read verse after verse from his well-worn Bible. The day he left the hospital he told me with tears in his eyes and rapture on his face that he had the joy of leading that nurse to faith in Jesus as her Savior and Lord the night before. “Now I can go home to heaven,” he said. As we wheeled him in his wheelchair to the van for his ride back home we heard a loud voice calling “Charlie! Charlie!” It was the nurse he led to Christ who was just coming on duty as we were leaving. She came to him with tears in her eyes and hugged him and thanked him for showing her how to be saved. Charlie died shortly after that. But before he did, he said again and again, “It was worth it all, just to lead that nurse to Jesus. I’d do it all again, just for that.”

It was Charlie's suffering that was the key that opened the door of witness to a woman he would never have met otherwise. God has doors for your key of suffering to open as well.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) How did God use the key of suffering in your life to open a door for outreach that otherwise wouldn't have come into your life?
- 2) Think of those whose lives have been touched and blessed because suffering has touched your life.

"Lord, You placed this key called suffering in my hand. You gave it to open doors into the lives of many others that Your grace and gospel might flow into their lives, as it has into mine. Help me see beyond my own pain and grief, to see the pain and grief of others who have not the source of all comfort, as I do. Rescue me from self-pity and help me see the privilege of ministry You have entrusted to me in my suffering. Use me. Use it. Use all to Your glory, O God of all comfort I pray. Amen."

10) Suffering is a Mission to Fulfill God's Purposes *Genesis 39-50*

Joseph was a man of faith. He was God-grounded, promise-persuaded, and future-focused. He understood that God had a purpose and as God's servant Joseph was responsible to think truth, believe truth, and live truth no matter what anyone else might or might not do.

God's mission for Joseph: Prepare the way for the preservation of the seed of Jacob from which Messiah will come in view of impending famine, and to demonstrate the glory of the God of Israel so that all nations may fear Him.

Satan's mission: Destroy the sons of Jacob from which Messiah will come. Incite the jealousy and hatred of Joseph's brothers against him. Destroy Joseph, thus eliminating at least one potential progenitor of the Christ. Incite the brothers to lie to Jacob. Use Potiphar's wife to seduce Joseph. Use slander to enrage Potiphar against him. Instigate the released prisoner to forget Joseph for two years after his release.

It seems that every step forward resulted in two steps backward. He starts in a pit, was sold as a slave, then was falsely accused and made a prisoner, and then he forgotten by the one man who had access to Pharaoh.

Every year ~~just~~ got harder. But Joseph believed God's promise and accomplished God's mission no matter where he was sent or stuck.

How could Joseph maintain his integrity, humility, loyalty, compassion, and forgiveness after 13 years of slavery and imprisonment and after 22 years of separation from his family? One thing is certain, Joseph was completely confident in God's absolute sovereignty, unchanging holiness, and eternal blueprint that was being carried out even by deeds of evil against him.

He declared to his brothers, *"You meant evil...but God meant it for good..."* (Genesis 50:20).

This reality of God's good purpose in all things was so ingrained in Joseph's soul purified by decades of suffering, that when the pressure was on, this truth came out. Evil is not excused, but it is contained. Evil is not tamed, but it is chained. Evil may surprise us, but it never surprises God. It does not excuse the wicked intentions of his brothers. It does not make light of the cost Joseph paid during 13 years of abandonment, slavery and imprisonment. But it does put everything in perspective: *"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives"* (Genesis 50:20).

When did he see God's good purpose? In the pit? Probably not.

When did he realize it? In Potiphar's house? Probably not.

When did it become plain? In the prison cell? Probably not.

In the palace of Pharaoh? Perhaps.

When his brothers showed up and he revealed himself to them? Definitely by then!

Genesis 45:5 At that point, Joseph was able to declare to his brothers, "And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because ***it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you***" (Genesis 45:5).

Joseph understood that God was sovereign and had to have had a purpose in allowing such suffering to come into his life. That faith and obedience over the 22 years that had passed (13 years of imprisonment and 7 years of plenty and the first 2 years of famine) was rewarded as his brothers showed up and God's plan became clear at last. Think of it. Twenty-two years enduring the pain without bitterness, malice, envy or anger. How is this possible? Only when a man understands by faith that his suffering is his assignment, his mission from God!

I don't know God's mission in your suffering, but He does. It may be 22 years or far longer until the purpose becomes plain, if it ever does. But the truth remains whether or not we can point to the result at this point in time. Trust God. Do right. Look ahead. Know this: God doesn't waste the pain in His people's lives. They mean too much to Him!

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) What mission has God sent you on as a direct result of your sufferings?
- 2) How has seeing God's bigger purpose for suffering in Joseph's life changed the way you are looking at your sufferings?
- 3) Does God always have a purpose in what He does or allows? Do we have to see it or understand it before we embrace it as real?

"Lord, I confess I have often felt this season of suffering is a mistake, not a mission. I have felt it is something to get through and escape from, not a mission to fulfill. No matter the source of this pain, the purpose is clear - to bless others through it. I yield my life to Your calling. Keep me close to You, a

clean vessel in Your hand, to bless others through this burden of suffering You assigned me. Lord, You accomplished Your mission of suffering for my sake. Give me Your grace to do so for Your sake now. In Your name I pray. Amen."

Chapter 13

11) Suffering is a Window through which God's Glory is Displayed *John 9, 11*

"As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,' said Jesus, 'but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life'" (John 9:1-3).

In the account of the man born blind, the disciples asked a question as to the cause of his suffering this disability from birth. In their view, suffering is the direct consequence of personal sin. Therefore, either this man sinned or his parents sinned to cause it. Jesus responds that it was not due to personal sin. It was not the result of some specific sin of his or of his parents. Having corrected their assumption, Jesus then says something truly startling: *"...this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life."* This suffering wasn't about displaying God's wrath, but about displaying God's glory.

The purpose behind this suffering was an opportunity to display God's work in his life. That is, that Jesus would heal him and God would get great glory. This is the reason for his life-long blindness and all the suffering that it brought with it. That God's purpose was to display His work in the blind man's life may be easy for an onlooker to accept. An onlooker could already see! But oh, how much harder it is for the sufferer himself to accept! It raises any number of answerless questions. "Couldn't God get enough glory without his having to suffer?" "Couldn't God get glory by healing him before all this time went by?" "Why did God have him be blind and not someone else?" We can't answer these questions to the satisfaction of any sufferer. But there is one question we can and must answer: "Is God's glory reason enough for all my suffering?" The answer to that question reveals much about our faith. A believer with a well taught and submissive heart will respond: "Yes, Lord. If it brings You glory, that's reason enough. That's all I need to know."

In the blind man's life, his healing was the window through which God's glory was displayed. In that ultimate sense, God will be glorified in the same way when He dries every tear and heals every heart and every body, removing all suffering in eternity when we are with Him. But what about today? Today, God still gets glory while we suffer. He still displays His work in our lives, not only when we're ultimately healed, but as we wait and walk through the valley of the shadow with Him. For His work in our souls is clearly displayed through the window of our sufferings in life. Only God could produce pure praise from a broken heart. Only God could create contentment in unbearable circumstance. Only God could do what He is doing in your heart in this season of suffering. Peter, writing to suffering believers *"It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil"* [1 Peter 3:17]) calls them to

get ready, because God is displaying something so astounding in their lives that unbelievers will demand a reason. Just like the crowds gathered in wonder when Jesus healed the blind man, so they will wonder at the miracle in God's suffering servants. What is that miracle? Hope in the midst of suffering! *1 Peter 3:15 "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..."* (1 Peter 3:15). Their hope would be so evident that others would ask them *"the reason for the hope that you have."* Their steadfast hope, the joyful expectation of what lies ahead, leaves unbelievers as astounded as they would have been if they had been healed of life-long blindness. God's work is displayed both now in the suffering, and then when it is removed. We have unshakeable hope now and unspeakable delight then. Others will look through the window of your suffering and see God's glory displayed. That hope, that confidence, that joyful expectation in your suffering is a miracle, an unmistakable evidence of God's work in your life.

"Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, 'Lord, the one you love is sick.' When he heard this, Jesus said, 'This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.' Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. Then he said to his disciples, 'Let us go back to Judea.' 'But Rabbi,' they said, 'a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?' Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light.' After he had said this, he went on to tell them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.' His disciples replied, 'Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.' Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So then he told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him'" (John 11:1-15).

In John's gospel, the raising of Lazarus from the dead is the miracle following Jesus' healing of the man born blind. It too teaches us that suffering is a window through which God's glory is displayed. This account is filled with insights for those who suffer terminal illness as well as for those who suffer grief and loss, mourning the death of loved ones. The account is a stream of questions and answers for both then and now.

The love of Jesus doesn't prevent suffering.

The love of Jesus for this family is unquestionable. Certain of this bedrock fact, Mary sent word to have Jesus come and heal her brother, *"the one He loved."* John the apostle would claim the same relationship with Jesus. We may confidently do the same. But the fact of Jesus' love didn't prevent this serious illness.

The love of Jesus doesn't mean we will understand His response.

Jesus says nearly the same thing about Lazarus' illness as He did about the blind man's affliction.

"When he heard this, Jesus said, 'This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.'" Jesus didn't say Lazarus wouldn't die, although that is what it sounded like. No, Jesus was speaking of the ultimate end, the purpose and plan of God. The sickness wouldn't end in death as though death would be the final end of it. But rather, this sickness would end in resurrection and God and His Son would get the glory through it.

The love of Jesus doesn't mean He'll do the things we so desperately want him to.

Time was of the essence. Time was running out. Urgency was essential. *"Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days."*

What a strange and heartbreaking response. Jesus didn't rush to his side. Jesus waited. Lazarus waited. Mary waited. Martha waited. Lazarus died. Why did Jesus wait? The logical answer was that He didn't really love Lazarus, because if He did, He wouldn't have stayed away. It's logical, but it's wrong.

The delay of Jesus doesn't mean He doesn't care about our pain.

We can imagine the sisters of Lazarus sobbing and sorrowing and asking each other again and again, "Why wasn't He here? If He was here, this wouldn't have happened. We asked Him to come. Why didn't He come? We told Him the need. He healed all those others. He healed strangers. Why not Lazarus? Why wasn't He here? Why did He let this happen?"

"When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. 'Lord,' Martha said to Jesus, 'if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha answered, 'I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' 'Yes, Lord,' she told him, 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.' And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. 'The Teacher is here,' she said, 'and is asking for you.' When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 'Where have you laid him?' he asked. 'Come and see, Lord,' they replied.

Jesus wept.

"Then the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?' Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 'Take away the stone,' he said. 'But, Lord,' said

Martha, the sister of the dead man, 'by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.' Then Jesus said, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, 'Take off the grave clothes and let him go'" (John 11:20-44).

Jesus knew. He knew Lazarus was dead before He came back to Bethany. He knew the pain it would cause the sisters. He knew the questions and conflicts it would cause. He knew.

Jesus waited. He waited because it was the Father's will. He waited even though He loved this family like His own. He waited.

Jesus came. He came at the right time even though the sisters said it was too late. He came because He cared. He came then because He was going to do something greater than if He had come earlier.

Jesus could. He could do what none of them thought possible. They believed Jesus could heal the sick. They believed He could keep people from dying. But they never understood that death itself was powerless before the Son of God. No one thought He could raise a man who had been dead four days. He could. He would.

Jesus wept. This was no synthetic sympathy, some manufactured tears for these grieving sisters. No, a thousand times, No! No one knew the reality of death like Jesus. Every human being on earth bears His image. Every human being on earth is loved by Him. Down through the ages, every death of every man, woman and child has broken not only the hearts of family and friends, but the heart of God. Jesus wept as a man. Jesus wept as a friend. Jesus wept for He loved Lazarus. Jesus wept so we would know that the all-sovereign Christ is also the all-sympathetic Christ. Jesus wept.

Jesus raised. He raised Lazarus. He gave him back to his sisters. He restored the sister's joy. He raised the faith of His disciples through this suffering to a level nothing else could have. Jesus raised the hearts of Mary and Martha to joys unknown before. Jesus raised them all. Jesus raised.

This glorious account doesn't minimize the sorrow, answer every question, or solve every riddle that remains to us in our suffering. But it does enable us to see what we must see to get through it, and to remember that God will be clearly seen through the windows of our suffering.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) *Has your vision of God grown greater and clearer through your suffering? Explain the change.*
- 2) *Is God's glory reason enough for all your suffering? Do you feel that truth deep in your soul?*

3) *Has your suffering been used of Satan to bring doubts to your mind about God's power, love, wisdom, or care towards you? How does looking at the cross put those doubts to death?*

"Lord, it seems my suffering only brings darkness and cloud. I never saw that it was given to me to reveal You and Your glory. If that is what it takes to make Your glory known, then have Your way with me. I know this suffering is not permanent. I know You could have prevented it in the first place. You are sovereign. You are good. You are wise. Show Your glory, in Your time, in Your way, through this season of suffering in my life. As long as You are glorified, it is enough... more than enough. In Jesus' name. Amen."

12) Suffering is a Hearing Aid Making God's Voice Loud and Clear *Psalm 119*

"Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees" (Psalm 119:67, 71).

Psalm 119 is an expanded acrostic using the Hebrew alphabet in 8-verse segments. All but three verses out of the 176 mention God's word: precepts, commandments, ordinances, law, word, promise, testimonies, rules, and statutes. Each section has a particular emphasis regarding the believer's relationship with God and His word. The point of this paragraph is the Psalmist's desire to be taught by God. He asks that God Himself would teach him His laws and precepts. What does this mean? Is He asking God for new revelation of new commands? Obviously not. God has already given His commands. What the Psalmist is pleading for is the work of God planting that Word deep into his heart so that it illumines, convicts, controls, and directs his every decision. *"Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:21-22).*

When life is easy and times are good, we tend to go our own way. God is still speaking, but we are deafened and distracted by the noise of this world. If affliction and suffering come to us, however, we turn our ears towards heaven and plead for God to show us what to do. As C. S. Lewis in his wonderful book *The Problem of Pain* said, *"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."*

This entire psalm is a prayer. It is the longest chapter, and the longest prayer in the Bible. We are called alongside to listen to this brother's prayer and make it our own.

"Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word" (Psalm 119:67).

Before he was afflicted... before he suffered... when things weren't so hard... when life was easy... he went astray. But now... but now that I am afflicted... now that I am suffering... now that life is hard... now that I recognize how much I need you... now I obey your word.

"It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees" (Psalm 119:71).

If nothing else good comes from our suffering than hearing God more clearly, loving His word more dearly, and following His way more faithfully, that is good enough for us, for now.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) Do you not listen to the Scriptures more intently in your affliction?
- 2) Do you not lean close to hear the promises?
- 3) Do you not repeat those precious words in your prayers?
- 4) Do you not remind yourself of those promises in your suffering more than you ever did in your ease?

"Lord, good has come to me from this suffering. It has taught me the value, the necessity, the treasure of Your promises and precepts as nothing else has. I hear Your voice so clear now. You have shown me things I never knew until this dark time came upon me. It may have been bad in itself, but it was good for me. And I never want to grow dull in hearing Your Word again. Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening. In the name of Christ Jesus I pray. Amen."

Chapter 14

13) Suffering is God's Gift *Philippians 1*

"For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have" (Philippians 1:29-30).

The language of Philippians 1:29-30 is shocking. Paul uses the word "given" to describe both our salvation *and* our suffering! This original word is translated variously as "given," "freely given," "hand over freely," and even "forgiven." It has to do with a free, generous, and undeserved gift. It makes sense to couple this with believing in Christ, for it is indeed a divine miracle of free grace that gave us a new birth which brought faith in Christ into our hearts. But suffering?! In what way can suffering ever be equated with the gracious gifting it describes in every other usage in the New Testament?

Paul saw everything in the light of Christ's divine sovereignty and wisdom. Therefore, if suffering is our lot, it is a gracious lot. If suffering is our portion, it is a gracious portion. If suffering is our assignment, it is a gracious assignment. The same God who gave you the gift of faith in Christ has given you the gift of suffering for Him. Both are gifts and therefore both are honors bestowed by a God who is pleased with His obedient children who suffer in His name. We see this demonstrated in Acts 5:40-41: *"When they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. And they departed from the presence of the council, **rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.**"* "Counted worthy to suffer..." You see, they considered it an honor, a gift from God, to suffer for Christ. Now, perhaps you're thinking, "But that's persecution. My suffering isn't persecution." O.K., good point. But your suffering is still suffering. And

your suffering is still to be seen in the light of God's same sovereignty. And if you suffer as God's child, it is a gift given by God to you for the same ultimate purpose, for His glory. We believe by God's gracious gift. We suffer by God's gracious gift. Same God... same gift... same purpose... same expected response of gratitude that we have been trusted with these priceless gifts of faith and suffering.

Nearly 40 years ago, a dear friend from college and his wife were in a terrible car accident on an icy road. He was an incredibly godly and focused young man. We had both graduated and immediately moved into our first churches as pastors. My friend's wife was killed in the accident, and he was in intensive care with severe injuries. I was shocked and grieved by this tragic news, and drove to the hospital to visit him. The first words from his mouth upon recognizing me were, "The Lord said to give thanks in everything. I am thanking God for taking my wife. I don't feel thankful. But I'll pray it, because it's right, and I mean it." I have never forgotten that heart-felt and honest response in what was and probably would be the greatest suffering he ever experienced. It left me humbled and instructed. It still does, all these years later.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) How does knowing your suffering is a gift given by the loving hand of God change your perspective?
- 2) Make a list of many other gracious gifts from your Heavenly Father through which you easily see His love and kindness. Compare them to your sufferings. Can you see the same hand giving both with the same love and concern for you?

"Lord Jesus, this season of suffering is Your gift. Like many gifts, I may not see the value of it at first. But I believe Your good and holy purpose in giving me this gracious gift. You gave me faith. You gave me salvation. You gave me righteousness. You gave me this suffering. I will take them all with thanksgiving, knowing Your heart, and trusting Your wisdom. Help me carry this gift wisely and well. In Your gracious name I pray. Amen."

14) Suffering is an Incentive and an Invitation to Pray *The Book of Psalms*

"Hear my prayer, O LORD, listen to my cry for help; be not deaf to my weeping. For I dwell with you as an alien, a stranger, as all my fathers were" (Psalm 39:12).

"Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I" (Psalm 61:1-2).

"Hear my prayer, O LORD; listen to my cry for mercy. In the day of my trouble I will call to you, for you will answer me" (Psalm 86:6-7).

"Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry for help come to you" (Psalm 102:1).

"The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the LORD: 'O LORD, save me!'" (Psalm 116:3-4).

"O LORD, hear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy; in your faithfulness and righteousness come to my relief" (Psalm 143:1).

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

Suffering is both an incentive and an invitation to pray. Suffering shouts to us that we need God. We need God’s strength, God’s mercy, God’s help, God’s intervention. Suffering calls us to pray. Suffering compels us to pray. Suffering commands us to pray. In this way, suffering takes us into the throne room of God more often, more sincerely, more dependently and more desperately than little else can. As David illustrates and Paul commands, “Don’t worry, but pray... always, in everything, with gratitude... to God.” The problem of pain may not be purged, but the peace of God will be provided. It is a peace to be found only in prayer. This prayer-provided-peace is beyond explanation, provides fortification, and ensures preservation. More than one of God’s own have said, “I never knew what it was to pray until this happened.”

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) How has suffering changed your prayer life? Illustrate the difference.
- 2) How has suffering changed the way you pray for others?

“Lord, here I am again. It seems this season of suffering has kept me before your throne continually. For that I am grateful. It has taught me how much I need You. It keeps me here, before Your face. And that’s the best place to be. I know I need You. I need Your grace. I need Your strength. I need Your peace. I need Your power to live another day. And I bless You that You will not deny me any of it. Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I. In Your glorious name I pray. Amen.”

Chapter 15

15) Suffering is Insurance, Protecting our Ministry 2 Corinthians 12

“To keep me from becoming conceited...there was given me a thorn...” (2 Corinthians 12:7).

The abundant revelations that God gave Paul were not wrong. Paul didn’t do anything improper in response to them. He tells us that this experience of suffering was God’s insurance policy protecting His investment in Paul’s life and ministry from pride. It was to keep Paul humble. It worked! Paul begged God three times for the suffering to be removed, but God said only that He would give Paul grace sufficient to endure it, unremoved. This suffering kept Paul dependent on God, humble in heart, and relying on daily, hourly, moment-by-moment grace. In other words, it kept Paul useable as a servant of Christ.

David did well in battle. It was when he was successful and stayed home that he fell into adultery. David did well with sling and sword. It was when the battles were over that his heart was lifted up in pride and he commanded Joab to take a census of the armies of Israel and Judah. (Even Joab, never noted for his

spiritual insights, knew this was wrong!) Too late David realized his sin of arrogance. And too late for thousands of Israelites who died because of his pride.

How many shipwrecks in the lives of God's servants have in fact been prevented by the storms of suffering God allowed to sweep over them? We see the storms as threatening. God sees them as defending. Defending us against the arrogance and pride that would otherwise destroy us and those we love. If suffering has humbled you, be grateful. It is God's insurance, to protect his investment; to protect us from ourselves!

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) How has suffering humbled you and protected you from sin?
- 2) How has suffering increased your sensitivity to the Holy Spirit?

"Lord, You promised to draw near to the humble, and nothing humbles my heart like suffering. There is no place for bragging or self-confidence now. The first words that come to my mind these days are: 'I need Thee every hour.' If this season of suffering brings me nothing else, it has surely guided me to a place of daily dependence on You, and for that I praise You. Though I ask You to remove this suffering, don't ever remove the daily realization of my need of You. Hear me as I pray in Your name. Amen."

16) Suffering is Our Employee, Put to Work to Achieve our Future Glory

2 Corinthians

"For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

Paul says that "our troubles... are achieving... glory for us." Suffering is a hired hand, your employee, brought on board to increase our productivity during this brief season of life. Suffering is accomplishing something in your life and mine. Let's not get bent out of shape by the adjectives "light and momentary troubles" that Paul uses in describing suffering. You and I might hear this description and get upset because we think it's minimizing our pain. We think, "My pain is not light, it's unbearably heavy. And it's not momentary. I've been carrying it for years and no end in sight. I'm sick and tired of hearing how 'somebody else has it worse than me' and 'Cheer up, it's not so bad!' It is bad! And the fact that somebody else has it worse is no help at all. Why can't Paul just get real and admit the pain? "

Good point. Let's listen to another account. *"I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea;*

and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.” Is this honest enough? You respond, “Yes. It’s about time somebody told it like it was.” Good. I’m glad you approve. Do you want to know who was Mr. Honest-About-His-Struggles? It’s the same guy! This is Paul speaking in 2 Corinthians 11:23- 28. When he says “**our** light and momentary troubles,” he includes himself. How long were these “momentary” troubles? They lasted his whole life! He died a martyr’s death! How light were they? Go back and read the verses again. After writing this he would suffer at least two more imprisonments and eventually beheading! So, Paul’s suffering was awful. Agreed? Then how could he call this suffering “light and momentary?” *It is ONLY light and momentary if it is COMPARED TO THE GLORY that is weighty and eternal.*

Comparing your suffering to somebody else’s suffering doesn’t make yours any lighter. I know people mean well when they remark, “Somebody else always has it worse.” But that just plain doesn’t help. It’s like the fellow who noted, “My friends told me to cheer up ‘cause it could always get worse. So I did. And sure enough, it got worse!?” There’s no help at all in that. Your suffering in itself may very well be hard, long, and heavy. So was Paul’s. But compare it with what it is going to produce... compare it to the result... compare it to the finished product: ETERNAL GLORY WITH CHRIST. Then it is light and momentary. It is compared with the outcome, *and only when compared with the outcome*, can we call it light and momentary.

Your reward for faithfully enduring this season of suffering will be an endless weight of glory yet unseen. So fix your gaze on Jesus and on the hidden, eternal, weight of glory your suffering is preparing for you. That glory you will lay at His feet in worship one day soon. The weight of the “well done” awaits.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) What good things have come from your suffering already?
- 2) What other good things can you expect to come from your season of suffering in the future?

“Lord, You have revealed that this season of suffering is my employee, working to produce a weight of glory to come. It seems this employee does its work slowly. But You say it does its work well. I will trust You to bring about the weight of glory You have promised it would bring. Shape and form me into Your image day by day during this shaping season of suffering. In Your name alone I ask. Amen.”

Chapter 16

17) Suffering is a Training Camp Producing Perseverance *Romans 5*

“Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance...” (Romans 5:3).

How can we rejoice in our sufferings? Again, it is only possible when we consider what they produce. Not only do they build a weight of glory, but they grow a strength of soul. Suffering is like training camp. I wrestled in high school. One summer the coach convinced me to attend a week of wrestling camp at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York. Every day brought me to the point of exhaustion. I experienced sprains, bruises, near concussions, had the wind knocked out of me, lost more matches than I could count, and never made it beyond the first slots in the wrestle offs. But one thing I did go away with: perseverance. I left that camp determined that I would not quit. I may not win, but I will not quit. I will not be pinned. I will not stop fighting. That’s what that struggle with suffering produced.

But I was not a believer in high school. The motivation was all wrong. The kind of resolve it produced was self-centered and built on pride. The suffering of the believer is in another realm altogether.

It has a different motivation: God’s glory.

It has a different power: The Holy Spirit.

It has a different outcome: humble obedience.

Perseverance is an unsung virtue. When was the last time you heard perseverance included in the list of qualifications for greatness? We need to regain the respect we once had for perseverance.

What is perseverance? Perseverance is determination, grit, doggedness, resolve, tenacity, devotion, dedication, endurance, diligence and steadfastness. Whew! It means never giving up doing what’s right. It means always obeying Christ, no matter the consequences. It means to keep going in the right direction. It means putting one foot ahead of the other one more time. It’s not glamorous. It’s not catchy. It’s not flashy. It’s not optional. You can’t be a follower of Jesus without it! Where can such a strength of soul come from? *“...Suffering produces perseverance...”* The very fact of your perseverance in following Christ is evidence of the fruit of suffering in your life.

Perseverance is just the beginning of the productivity of suffering. The rest of the passage shows us that there is ongoing productivity that only started with perseverance. *“...**suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and **character, hope.** And **hope** does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us**”* (Romans 5:3-5). In all of this painful process leading from suffering to glory we see the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit and the love of God poured into our hearts to sustain us. The training camp of suffering will lead us to the fullness of Christ-likeness. That’s the hope we long for and that will never disappoint us.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) Do you tend to make excuses and quit when you know you should pray and press on? Are you growing in perseverance?
- 2) How has suffering been used of God to develop perseverance in your heart and life?
- 3) Who are some fellow believers who have demonstrated great perseverance in their faith? Ask them if suffering has contributed to their strength of soul along the way.

“Lord, You endured everything for me. Give me the grace to endure in this season of suffering. Use it to train me in the blessed skill of perseverance in obedience. You have promised Your presence and Your power in it all. Bring the fruit of perseverance out of the soil of suffering so You will get the glory. In the name than endures forever I pray. Amen.”

18) Suffering is a Teacher, Instructing Us to Be Content *Philippians 4*

Philippians 4:11-15 “I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only...” (Philippians 4:11-15).

Paul was the recipient of financial assistance from the church at Philippi on several occasions. A prisoner now in Rome, he was deeply appreciative of this love and support in the midst of his suffering. Yet, in addition to his appreciation, he expresses to them a lesson learned through his long years of affliction. *“I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation...”* Contentment isn’t a personality trait; it must be learned. Contentment is not impossible; it can be learned. Contentment is a rare and costly education, learned in the classroom of suffering. Listen to his words. They reveal the insights learned from affliction, the training received from tribulation, the knowledge gained from grief. *Phil 1:21 “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).*

Phil 2:17-18 But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me” (Philippians 2:17-18).

“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ-- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:7-11).

“However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me-- the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace” (Acts 20:24).

Paul was wholly focused on fulfilling God's purpose. He died to live and lived to die. His circumstances were incidental, not determinative to his contentment. He was content to have and to have not. God would sustain him until his work was done. Death was not to be dreaded. Strangers to suffering recoil at the thought. We in the West consider being comfortable, well supplied, healthy and at ease to be requirements for contentment. That perspective is dealt a lethal blow in these verses. Paul tells us that contentment is not a condition dependent on ease, but a lesson learned from suffering that can be obtained and sustained in the worst of circumstances. This teacher called suffering is harsh and cold, but incredibly effective. Let us learn from her the precious lessons she taught Paul.

Life is worth living.

Death is worth dying.

Christ is all.

Nothing else matters.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) What areas of discontent are most common in your heart and life?
- 2) How does discontent dishonor God and rob you of the joy and peace He offers?
- 3) How can suffering help us find true contentment even in the most difficult circumstances?

"Lord, You sent this season of suffering to teach me what really matters. And what really matters is what I already have. I have You! The longer this season lasts, the greater the lesson that "things" really don't matter. You do. Your will, Your purpose, Your glory, Your presence: that's what matters. Thank You for the lesson. Let me never forget it. Give me a contented heart, complete in You today. In Your name, Lord Jesus Christ, I pray. Amen."

Chapter 17

19) Suffering is a Furnace Forging Deeper Bonds of Intimacy with Others

Philippians 3

The Fellowship of Suffering with Christ

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead"
(Philippians 3:10-11).

Paul's passion was to know Christ better and better. He had a personal relationship with Christ which was real and intimate. But though he was content with his circumstances, (4:11) he was not content with his present knowledge of Christ. This sort of sanctified discontent should characterize us all. Jesus Christ is real! Our relationship with Him grows deeper and deeper as we abide in Him and in His word. This intimacy of love, affection and interaction is to be ever growing. Paul wanted to know his Savior better. Paul wanted to experience Christ's resurrection power, that life-giving, life-changing power that transforms each of us into the image of Christ. And, Paul wanted to enter into an intimacy of sharing

life with Christ that could only be brought about by suffering. Paul calls it, “the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings.” This is a relationship built by experiencing a shared suffering with the Savior. To understand the meaning, step back and consider that suffering together always forges deeper bonds of intimacy. Soldiers on a battle field enjoy a bond of fellowship outsiders cannot know. Their shared suffering makes it what it is. The book *ENDURANCE* is the story of Ernest Shackleton and the men who followed him on his quest to reach the South Pole in 1914-1916. These men experienced a fellowship of suffering. They were stranded for over a year on the ice-bound Antarctic seas. After being rescued and returning to England they found their homeland embroiled in World War I. Many enlisted and survived. When the war was over, these same men volunteered to go back with Shackleton for a second try! After all they’d been through, why would they go back? It was because they shared an incredible bond, forged in the intensity of their shared suffering, that it seemed only right to try again. To share in Christ’s sufferings is to grieve what He grieves, and weep for what He weeps. It means to lay our lives down for the sheep He laid His life down for. It means to receive the hatred of those who hate Him. To enter into His suffering is to be weary, hungry, thirsty, grieving, hurting, suffering, rejected, and dying with Him. It means all of this and more. To know Christ in the deepest sense, we must enter the furnace of suffering with Him. Daniel’s three friends knew their God before they were thrown into that fiery furnace. Though the furnace did not hurt them, it did forge a bond of fellowship between them that nothing else could. And, in that furnace they saw their God and Savior come and walk with them in the fire. Their relationship with God was deepened and strengthened in that fellowship of suffering. Suffering has a way of forging intimacy with Christ that makes it worth it all.

The Fellowship of Suffering with Others

“And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking unto Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt” (1 Samuel 18:1, 3-4).

The friendship of David and Jonathan was birthed in war. When David killed Goliath, and the armies of Saul defeated the Philistines, Jonathan discovered a friend with the same heart, same bravery, same loyalty, and same God. Jonathan demonstrated his love and loyalty to David by giving him his robe, and his weapons of war. Jonathan was the king’s son, and as such would have had the best clothes and weapons available. This was no mere hand-me-down gift. This was a sacrifice second to none!

Their friendship would be tested by Saul’s jealousy, national loyalties, and personal priorities. It was tested and became stronger than ever. You remember how Jonathan protected David from Saul’s jealous rages and even made a covenant to be loyal to him forever. *“So Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, “May the LORD call David’s enemies to account.” And Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath out of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself” (1 Samuel 20:16-17).* The outcome of Saul’s murderous plot was that David was forced to leave his home and go into exile among the Philistines. *“David got up from the south side of the stone and bowed down before Jonathan three times, with his face to the ground. Then they kissed each other and wept together-- but David wept the most. Jonathan said to David, ‘Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the*

name of the LORD, saying, "The LORD is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever." Then David left, and Jonathan went back to the town" (1 Samuel 20:41-42).

As the years passed, David grew increasingly discouraged. The passing of time did nothing to lessen Saul's hatred. Jonathan came to David secretly to encourage him.

"While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph, he learned that Saul had come out to take his life. And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God. 'Don't be afraid,' he said. 'My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this.' The two of them made a covenant before the LORD. Then Jonathan went home, but David remained at Horesh" (1 Samuel 23:15-18).

The friendship that was born in a battle was tested and even strengthened in the long days of testing and exile. Distance didn't weaken the bond. They enjoyed a fellowship of suffering that would endure it all. Note the continuing self-sacrifice of Jonathan. You remember it started with Jonathan giving David his possessions. Now Jonathan comes to encourage David to believe God, and to affirm his loyalty, as he gives up any claim to his father's throne. Jonathan wants David to be strong in faith, and certain of their friendship. While suffering brought out the worst in Job's friends, it brought out the best in Jonathan. Suffering never leaves us the same. And it never leaves our friendships the same. Suffering breaks the weak ones and builds the strong ones. Suffering calls us to ask the deep questions, to listen intently, and to discover the real needs of others. Suffering takes us deeper into relationships as it exposes more of our hearts, reveals more of our deepest needs, and requires more time and care than surface relationships ever do. You will never forget those who have stood with you, listened to you, wept with you, and cared for you through that season. As much as we long for and value such a friend in our own suffering, let's be sure to be that kind of friend when others suffer. You know what you needed then. You know what they need now. Give it, and enter into the fellowship of suffering with others.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) Who has become a special and treasured friend as a direct outcome of a season of suffering in your life? What has been most precious about the friendship?
- 2) Why is suffering often necessary to build deep and lasting friendships?

"Lord, those who suffer with You, and for You, and also with others, own a bond of intimacy and understanding that those who are strangers to suffering cannot know. You use this furnace of affliction to forge these bonds of love and connectedness. I know You intended this valley of suffering to deepen my walk with You and with true friends who've walked with me through it. Grant me the grace to be there for others who face suffering in the future. I ask it in Your name, O ever-present One. Amen."

20) Suffering is an Inheritance Shared with Christ *Romans 8*

"For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

"Now if we are children, then we are heirs-- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:15-18).

This passage requires some time to digest. It has the common connection between suffering and glory used by both Peter and Paul. In verse 15 we are reminded that as God's children we are indwelt by the Spirit and call God "Abba Father." This is the blessing of intimacy between God the Father and His children, as "Abba" means "Daddy." I learned elementary Hebrew from a rabbi in a Jewish synagogue near our first church ministry. We met in an empty classroom in the synagogue school for our weekly lesson. On one particular afternoon as we were poring over vocabulary words, the hall behind us echoed with a loud, excited cry. A little girl who was walking by the open door of our classroom with her friends looked in and spotted my teacher and friend Mordecai. The little girl was his daughter. Crying out with joyful enthusiasm: "Abba, Abba, Abba," she ran into the room, jumped into his arms and threw her hands around his neck, hugging him tightly. Mordecai then introduced me to his daughter, after which she ran back to join her friends. That day the vocabulary word "abba" was burned into my heart. I cannot hear "abba" without the image of that excited child with her father coming into view. This is the blessing of childhood joy.

Paul then takes us from the joy of being children of our Father in verses 15 and 16, to the blessing of full inheritance as adults in verse 17. The child is heir to his father's wealth, but that inheritance is not dispensed until the child is mature enough to manage it. In this verse we are informed our inheritance comes in two stages shared equally with Christ. Paul uses the prefix "συν" meaning "with," "co," or "joint," and connects it with three words - heir, suffer, and glory.

Consider these five facts:

That Children are also heirs *"Now if we are children, then we are heirs"*

That what we will inherit is from God our Father *"heirs of God"*

That our inheritance is shared equally with Christ *"co-heirs with Christ"*

That we are co-heirs in Christ's suffering now - *"if indeed we **share in his sufferings**"*

That we are co-heirs in Christ's glory in the future - *"in order that we may also **share in his glory**"*

Let me render the three compound words hyper-literally so you can see how Paul puts them together.

*"Now if we are children, then we are heirs-- heirs of God and **co-heirs** with Christ, if indeed we are **co-sufferers** with Him, in order that we may also be **co-glorified** with Him."*

Both suffering and glory are parts of our shared inheritance with Christ as God's children. All the co-heirs of God inherit both suffering and glory. And notice Paul doesn't focus on our co-heirship with each other, but rather our co-heirship with Christ. Christ suffered. Christ is glorified. We will suffer with Him as co-heirs. We will be glorified with Him as co-heirs. The suffering is now. The glory is coming. We are

given the inheritance of suffering now, to prepare us to manage the inheritance of the glory soon to be bestowed. It is in this context that he goes on to declare, *“I consider that **our present sufferings** are not worth comparing with **the glory that will be revealed in us.**”* The suffering is real but limited. The glory is real and unlimited. The suffering is real but temporary. The glory is real and eternal. The suffering is real but measured. The glory is real and immeasurable. Granted, we cannot fathom what that final, full and eternal inheritance of glory will be (*“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him”* [1 Corinthians 2:9]) but we do have glimpses in such passages as 1 John 3:1-2, *“...We will be like Him for we will see Him as He is,”* and Philippians 3:20-21, *“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body”* and Revelation 3:21, *“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.”* You are a co-heir. You are a co-sufferer. You will be co-glorified with Christ. Manage well your inheritance now as His co-sufferer. Jesus accomplished it perfectly while He was here. Let us do it well as long as it lasts. And be assured, the rest of the inheritance will be well worth the wait, even if that wait is long and hard. If you manage well the inheritance of temporary suffering now, your Father will soon trust you with glory forever. *“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much”* (Luke 16:10).

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) Considering all the treasured inheritances we have as believers, how does regarding suffering as an inheritance from God change your perspective on its value?
- 2) How has suffering given you a clearer understanding of Christ’s sufferings for you?

“Lord, I never knew that this season of suffering was part of my shared inheritance with You. The first part of the inheritance! Help me to embrace it knowing Your hands are holding it, and me, as the co-heir. I want to manage this earthly inheritance of suffering well for You. You must show me the way. Help me, O Lord Jesus Christ, heir of all things. Amen.”

Chapter 18

21) Suffering is an Appetizer Increasing Our Hunger for Heaven **1 Peter, 2 Corinthians**

*“As newborn babes, **desire** the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious”* (1 Peter 2:2-3).

*“For in this (body) we groan, **earnestly desiring** to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven...”* (2 Corinthians 5:2).

The Greek word translated “desire” in 1 Peter 1:2 and “earnestly desiring” in 2 Corinthians 5:2 is a word indicating a deep, strong, and compelling longing. This desire is just like that of babies who having tasted their mother’s milk cannot be satisfied without it and cry with increasing intensity if denied it. So

we who have tasted the first-fruits of salvation learn through our times of painful waiting (“groan”) in suffering to long for heaven and our glorified bodies.

The phrase “working up an appetite” is applied to exercise routines or hard work. In the same way our routine of laboring through seasons of suffering works up an appetite within us for being glorified with our Savior, and in His presence forever.

Many are the times I have sat by the side of suffering saints who speak with the sincere realization borne of deep loss, “I never knew what a treasure I had until I lost her.” Suffering brings home to us the realization, not of what we have lost permanently, but rather of what we long for that is yet to come. An appetite for heavenly joys cannot be birthed in the soul of a saint who knows no suffering. When a man’s life is easy, full, quiet and amply supplied with all that the world can give, how shall he look for heaven with fervency? We see such a man in Luke 12:19, *“And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.’”*

Such a man does not say “to die is gain!” Such a man lives for this life. He knows no longings but for his present life to be extended indefinitely. It is earthly rest he seeks, not heavenly. His riches are earthly. His appetite is earthly. His longings are earthly. His hopes are earthly. We know God’s label for such a man: *“You fool....”*

God loves us too much to let such vanities consume us and rob us of the real treasures found in heavenly longings for heavenly joys. And so He allows us the appetizer of suffering to purify our spiritual taste buds for the real delicacies found only at the wedding feast He is preparing for us. It is in this context that John the Apostle, in the suffering and pain of his persecution and isolation on Patmos, hears the Lord Jesus say in Revelation 22:20, *“Surely I am coming quickly.”* He responds immediately and fervently, *“Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!”* The appetizer of suffering worked! He was ready for the main course at Christ’s return! Are we?

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) What is your favorite appetizer for your favorite meal?
- 2) How has suffering made your desire for this world fade?
- 3) How has suffering make your longing for heaven even greater?

“Lord, I want to hunger for heaven, not just because I want to escape from this present suffering, but because it has created a greater hunger for You. May this present season of suffering increase my hunger for seeing You and being with You forever. Wean me from this world, and make me satisfied only with the prospect of seeing You. I ask this, O Living Bread, the only hunger-healer of the soul, in Your name. Amen.”

22) Suffering is a Labor Pain - A Preparation for Soon-Coming Joy *Romans* 8

*“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation **eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God**. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into **the glorious liberty of the children of God**. For we know that the **whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs** together until now. Not only that, but **we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting** for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance.*

*“Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but **the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings** which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:18-28).*

We looked at these verses in the opening pages of our study to demonstrate that the groaning of suffering is, since the Fall, pervasive in all of creation, every Christian and even the Holy Spirit Himself. If we take a closer look, we discover something wonderful about this groaning. To overlook it is to rob ourselves of a tremendous truth. This description of the painful moaning of the sufferer is not a generalization of sorrow or distress. It is a very specific kind of suffering. Each phrase is distinctly and graphically describing the labor and delivery of a baby!

Let’s look at each of these phrases in turn:

“eagerly awaits the revealing” is like the mother waits for the baby to be revealed as it comes out of the womb;

“delivered ... into glorious liberty” is like the baby captive in the womb comes out into glorious liberty;

“groans and labors with birth pangs” is like the mother groans and works hard through all the pain;

“groan... eagerly waiting.. the redemption of our body” is like a birth from the womb of the grave, we await the resurrection and glorification of our bodies;

“groanings which cannot be uttered” is like the wordless groans escaping the lips of the mother giving birth.

In every phrase the imagery of birth pains is the constant connecting theme. Just like labor pains, our sufferings in this world are not useless, pointless, or permanent. There is purpose in the pain. Even in the midst of it there is a positive prospect that it will soon end in a glorious outcome. Can something so painful be welcomed and even longed for? A mother’s willingness to endure this suffering of birth pains again and again is undeniable. It was brought home to me at the birth of our first child. Our hospital was one of the first in the nation to promote natural childbirth, and to welcome the father into the delivery room from start to finish. Waiting for those labor pains to begin seemed endless. We were told our

baby's due date was August 3rd. He didn't come until September 6th! That was one long month! But the day finally arrived when the contractions began. We went to the hospital when the pains were five minutes apart. My wife was examined and we were sent home to wait until the contractions dropped to three minutes apart with regularity. In the middle of the night, as my wife couldn't sleep, she suggested we go downstairs and play Scrabble to pass the time. The first three words we spelled were agony, labor, and pain! We decided to forget the game and go back to bed! The pains eventually dropped to three minutes and we headed off to hospital at 4:00 am. The little guy was born twelve hours later. My dear wife endured 24 hours of labor pains. I had the joy of tying and cutting the cord, and placing our son into her arms as she lay on the delivery bed. Her hair was matted with sweat. She was exhausted beyond words. The look in her eyes, however, as she gazed at her baby was priceless. Then, like a really sensitive husband, I leaned down and kissed her on the forehead and asked, "Well, sweetheart, are you ready for another one?" (No, she didn't kill me!) She looked at me, smiled, and said with a quiet sigh, "Yes, but not today." Amazing! After the most excruciating experience of her life, she was willing to do it again, and again and again. Why? For the joy of what comes after. Just so are we called to keep the end in view. Remember these three realities from Romans 8: 1) Your pain has a purpose: to bring forth life. 2) Your pain has a partner: your Savior is with you all the way. 3) Your pain has a prospect: it will end with unspeakable joy.

Your suffering is a labor pain. It's preparation for soon-coming joy.

Questions for Contemplation

- 1) How has suffering prepared you for the joys of heaven?
- 2) What are you most looking forward to when your final season of suffering is done?

"Lord, this labor pain called suffering seems endless at times. Sometimes I wonder if I ever lived without it. But You have promised that it is both temporary and gloriously productive. You have promised it will end with unspeakable joy. I will trust You in the labor, knowing You will bring the joy in Your time. I pray in Your faithful name, O Lord Jesus Christ. Amen."

REVIEW

Once more we return to the foundational facts regarding human suffering and the believer.

Sin caused it; mercy limits it; sovereignty directs it; wisdom designs it; and grace ends it.

Sin Caused it... God is just. Through Adam's rebellion, all the misery and pain, suffering and sorrows of life were brought into God's perfect world. Pain, suffering, sorrow, disease, and death are all consequences of Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden. Just as suffering and death were unleashed by one man's disobedience, so Romans 5:12-21 tells us that through one man's obedience, the God-man Jesus Christ, they will be forever crushed and eliminated. *"Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned... the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! ...For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ... For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous... so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."*

Sin and its consequences are vastly worse than temporal physical suffering, as awful as that is. The ultimate consequence of sin is the second death, eternal separation from God in hell. This is God's just condemnation for all mankind, you and me included.

Mercy Limits it... God is kind. God has limited the consequences of Adam's sin for all men by the continual exercise of His free grace. None of us suffer to the extent that we deserve. If we truly understood the infinite holiness of God and therefore the infinite offensiveness of our sin to Him, we would be shocked, not at the extent of suffering in this world, but at the extent of the pleasure, joy, and goodness all of us enjoy, while deserving not the least of it. And as believers in Jesus Christ, we have been spared the unspeakable suffering of eternal separation from God in the lake of fire. The gracious invitation given through God's free grace for forgiveness and everlasting life is offered to anyone who desires it. *"The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life"* (Revelation 22:17).

Sovereignty Directs it... God is working.

Scripture is replete with examples of God's sovereign direction over the suffering of His beloved children. Job, Joseph, Ruth, Daniel, Peter, Paul, and above all our Lord Jesus prove that suffering is allowed into the lives of God's own, not simply as an inescapable consequence of Adam's sin, but as a directed instrument accomplishing God's ultimate and perfect will. God is not just an observer of our suffering, but is actively working in and through it every moment of every day he allows it. No suffering touches you, as one of God's loved ones, without His express permission and accompanying direction.

Wisdom Designs it... God is good.

God's wise and perfect design in the suffering He allows us to experience is often hidden from us in this life. Yet Scripture is clear as to God's nature being all-knowing and all-wise and all-good and all-just and all-powerful. This theology of Scripture regarding God's character and nature is essential in providing sufficient comfort to enable us to persevere in faith through our suffering. Nothing happens in our lives apart from God's wise and eternal purposes, including suffering. The God who designed the universe and the atom, the galaxies and the cell, is the God who has designed the decades and the seconds of our lives in perfect, if veiled, omniscience. Sometimes we are given glimpses as to the purpose, as was Joseph. *"God intended it for good..."* (Genesis 50:20). But don't forget that he suffered for 13 years before God's purpose became clear. Though Jeremiah's life would end in martyrdom in a destroyed city with no clear answers in his suffering, he affirmed in his heartbreaking funeral song, *"The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him..."* (Lamentations 3:25). Jeremiah confessed that God was wise and good, even in the midst of life's worst.

Grace Ends it... God is worthy.

There is coming a day for the children of God when suffering will forever end and never reappear. On that glorious day when we see the Savior and enter the New Jerusalem, there will only be one evidence of the existence of sin and suffering in the past. That evidence will not be seen in the city. It will not be seen in the angels. It will not be seen in you or your fellow glorified saints. It will be seen in one person. It will be heard in one song. *"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain!"* The Lamb, our Savior, will bear the scars still visible in His resurrected glory. While we shall never experience suffering ever again, we shall never, ever forget why! It was His suffering above all suffering, for us, that ended all our suffering by His glorious grace.

PART 3

Chapter 19

SEVEN PRIORITIES IN YOUR SUFFERING FROM THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

Each of these seven priorities flow out of the book of Hebrews. As you may know, this book was written to Jewish (Hebrew) Christians in the first century who had experienced a great deal of suffering. They were rejected by family and friends and considered traitors to the nation by confessing Jesus as Messiah. This was especially painful due to the ever-increasing Roman persecution of their fellow Jews. They suffered the loss of finances, possessions, freedom, family, health and well-being. Consider the following texts from this book written to suffering saints:

*“Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of **suffering**. Sometimes you were **publicly exposed to insult and persecution**; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the **confiscation of your property**, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions”* (Hebrews 10:32-34).

*“Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which **suffer adversity**, as being yourselves also in the body”* (Hebrews 13:3).

*“And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, **bearing the disgrace he bore**. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come”* (Hebrews 13:12-14).

With this context in view, the admonitions of the author are particularly valuable to suffering saints in every age. May these seven priorities encourage you as you walk with your Savior in this season of suffering.

SEVEN PRIORITIES IN YOUR SUFFERING... FROM HEBREWS

Priority #1 Don't Stop Seeking God Hebrews 10:19-25

*“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **let us draw near to God with a sincere heart** in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. **Let us hold unswervingly** to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us **consider how we may spur one another on** toward love and good deeds. **Let us not give up meeting together**, as some are in the habit of doing, but **let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching**”* (Hebrews 10:19-25).

Intense suffering drives us from God or drives us to Him. *It never leaves us the same.* The decision to worship God is always the right decision, in every circumstance, every time.

"Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped. He said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD'" (Job 1:20-21).

Job's heart was crushed, his dreams were dead, his mind was reeling, and his spirit was broken. But in the midst of all the pain, he chose to acknowledge God and bless His name. He blessed God, not because of the blessings of life, for they were gone. But he blessed God in the absence of those blessings. Satan was certain Job would curse God in his loss and pain. Instead, Job blessed God in brokenhearted worship.

"Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart..."

In all your suffering, keep worshipping your God. Worship Him personally and privately, and worship Him corporately and publicly. In all your pain, keep praising Him for Who He is. In all your affliction, keep seeking His face and holding up empty hands to receive all-sufficient grace for one more hour.

"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful."

Remember the confidence you had in God before this time of pain and loss? God hasn't changed. If there ever was a time to hold firmly to God's promises, it is in the dark places where suffering blots out all other comforts. If His promises were worth holding on to at noon, they are worth holding on to at midnight. Satan may throw a thousand reasons at us to doubt them, but there is always one supreme and all-sufficient reason to trust them: God made them. Hold on to the promises.

"...consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Keep gathering with God's people. You belong in the assembly, even when your suffering tells you that nobody understands and nobody cares. Don't fall prey to the temptation to withdraw into yourself. Getting yourself ready and going into the assembly of believers may be the hardest thing you've done all week. But it's absolutely the right thing to do. You display the sufficiency of God as you worship in the midst of your pain. Don't wait until the suffering is over before you worship. Don't let the pain, the sorrow, the shame, the weakness, the darkness, or the deadness rob God of your worship and you of His comforts. You're not the only hurting soul church this Sunday. We are all broken people coming into the presence of Jehovah Rapha, our healer. So, in all your suffering, don't stop seeking after God.

Priority #2 Don't Stop Submitting to His Sovereign Will Hebrews 12:7-11

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" (Hebrews 12:7-11).

Discipline is not a negative term either in its purpose or its result if the one who is disciplined submits and learns through it and from it. The essence of discipline is training. The key to fruitful discipline is the holy motivation of the one who does the disciplining, and the submissive response of the one so disciplined. The author of Hebrews tells us that hardship (suffering) is God's discipline. This does not mean punishment for doing evil, but rather training for achieving maturity and ensuring greater responsibilities in life. True, discipline is painful. But it is a purposeful and productive pain. We ourselves do not enjoy the process, nor do we determine the length or severity of it. What we do possess is the ability to embrace the process and grow in holiness. The key to this productive, painful process is submission.

We submit to God's glorious sovereignty.

"Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

It is not our choice to experience suffering. It is our choice to experience it with great profit. This starts with a heartfelt response of yielding to God as God in our suffering. Job and Joseph both exemplified this yielded spirit in the midst of their great suffering. It is hard, but not impossible. Among the things we can do through Christ who gives us strength is to yield to our God's sovereignty without resentment. We do this by staying focused on the cross. Preach to yourself the gospel all over again, and submit.

We submit to God's great wisdom.

Psalm 131:1-2 "My heart is not proud, O LORD, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me" (Psalm 131:1-2).

We do not submit because we see or understand God's immediate plan in our pain. We submit because we are convinced that God is infinitely wise in His ways. We acknowledge that God's ways are beyond our comprehension and so we do not demand answers before we submit to that wisdom. We submit to God's wisdom with the quiet contentment of a weaned child, not knowing the answers, but knowing our God is worthy of our trust. Stop spinning your mental wheels trying to figure out what's hidden from you. Job came to the place where he refrained from asking questions and rested in the mystery of omniscient sovereignty, knowing his God was with him.

We submit to God's gracious promise.

"May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (Hebrews 13:20-21).

He is working in us what is pleasing to Him through both pleasure and pain, happiness and heartache, rest and rigor. We have the promise that we will "share in His holiness" in the end.

We submit to God's glorious purpose.

"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Hebrews 5:7-9).

Gethsemane reveals the anguish of Jesus' heart, the horror of the prospect, and the extent of His willing submission as He accepted the Father's unchangeable purpose. By the Holy Spirit Whom He gave us we can do the same in the midst of our own Gethsemane. So, in your suffering, don't stop submitting to His sovereign will.

Priority #3 Don't Stop Searching Your Heart to Maintain a Clean Conscience Hebrews 13:18

"Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way" (Hebrews 13:18).

Suffering by itself is hard enough to bear. Do not add the unbearable burden of a guilty conscience to all your pain.

Job's suffering was beyond description, but he did not suffer from a guilty conscience. *"My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go: my heart shall not reproach me so long as I live"* (Job 27:6).

David in the Psalms could pray fervently in his suffering by appealing to a clean conscience.

"Hear, O LORD, my righteous plea; listen to my cry. Give ear to my prayer-- it does not rise from deceitful lips. May my vindication come from you; may your eyes see what is right. Though you probe my heart and examine me at night, though you test me, you will find nothing; I have resolved that my mouth will not sin. As for the deeds of men-- by the word of your lips I have kept myself from the ways of the violent. My steps have held to your paths; my feet have not slipped. I call on you, O God, for you will answer me; give ear to me and hear my prayer" (Psalm 17:1-6).

Paul aimed to live with a continually clean conscience. This was a source of quiet relief in spite of his frequent suffering and pain; Paul experienced the relief of knowing his heart was right with God.

“So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man” (Acts 24:16).

“The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5).

“...holding on to faith and a good conscience...” (1 Timothy 1:19).

“I thank God, whom I serve, as my forefathers did, with a clear conscience...” (2 Timothy 1:3).

“...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:22).

While Scripture does teach that disobedient believers will experience the suffering of divine chastisement (1 Corinthians 11:30), it also teaches that the godliest among His own also experience suffering (Job 1-2). By searching our hearts in humble self-examination and sincere confession we can put to rest any false guilt that may plague us, by the answer of a clean conscience before God. Then we can rest assured that whatever suffering we experience is not the result of any ongoing divine displeasure, but rather for our growth in grace.

“Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer” (Psalm 19:12-14).

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23-24).

So, don't stop searching your heart to maintain a clean conscience before God.

Priority #4 Don't Stop Silencing Satan's Suggestions by Means of Prayer and Scripture Hebrews 4:11-13

“Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience. For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:11-13).

Satan is a deceiver, a slanderer, an instigator of doubts and rebellion. He knows how to use our suffering to his evil advantage against us. The only way to effectively silence him is to use prayer and the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. Jesus demonstrated the way for us in His decisive desert victory over Satan. Remember, Jesus overcame every suggestion of Satan by using only the weapons available to us today: the Word of God and prayer.

Turn every temptation into immediate intercession

We can train ourselves to turn away from Satan's suggestions through prayer. The moment doubt or deception enters, carry it into the presence of your God saying, “Lord, cleanse my mind and make me

pure. I want to be holy in Your sight. Jesus, You died to make me pure. Make me a clean vessel today.” There is no magic in the words. It is God’s presence that overcomes the evil. I have discovered that turning every temptation into immediate intercession, taking every evil suggestion into the throne room of God, is the sure way of maintaining victory.

Use Scripture offensively

The only effective antidote to deception is truth. Daily Scripture memory is a powerful spiritual discipline. It focuses the mind on truth and fosters an awareness of God’s presence. As a new believer, I discovered that quoting Scripture aloud in the midst of a battle with temptation enabled me to conquer it.

“I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11).

“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

“...for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:16).

“Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin” (1 Peter 4:1).

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:5-8). Such Scriptures as these were powerful weapons in overcoming sin. They remain as powerful today as when they were written. So, don’t stop silencing Satan’s suggestions by prayer and Scripture.

Priority #5 Don’t Stop Shoring Up your Hope by Staying Future-Focused Hebrews 9:28; 10:34-37; 10:22-25; 11:10-26; 12:28

*“...so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and **he will appear a second time**, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:28).*

*“You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had **better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.** You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, **you will receive** what he has promised. **For in just a very little while, ‘He who is coming will come and will not delay’**” (Hebrews 10:34-37).*

*“...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us **hold unswervingly to the hope we profess**, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and **all the more as you see the Day approaching**” (Hebrews 10:22-25).*

“(Abraham) was looking forward to the city with foundations...

*“All these people were **still living by faith when they died**. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and **welcomed them from a distance**. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are **looking for a country** of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were **longing for a better country-- a heavenly one**. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*

*“By faith Isaac **blessed** Jacob and Esau **in regard to their future**.*

*“By faith Jacob, when he was dying, **blessed** each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.*

*“By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and **gave instructions about his bones**.*

*“(Moses) regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was **looking ahead to his reward**” (Excerpts from Hebrews 11:10-26).*

*“Therefore, since **we are receiving a kingdom** that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe...” (Hebrews 12:28).*

Hebrews chapters 9-13 are filled with exhortations and reminders of the importance of a faith that looks ahead, through the present sufferings, to the glory that will soon be ours. It is easy, when suffering ~~is~~ consumes our present hours, to completely lose sight of eternity. It can even seem that others lack compassion and make light of our grief when they speak of Christ's return and heaven's joys awaiting. Yet Scripture is clear that, while our faith rests on the past: His cross; it reaches towards the future: His coming. A faith that is not firmly focused on the future will soon weaken and fail in the midst of heavy trials. This is not some vain attempt to escape the present by ignoring the pain and pretending it will soon go away. It may not go away for years or even for a lifetime. However, let's not lose sight, in the dark and painful present, of the reality of the glorious future that really does await us. This suffering will not last. The desert journey will end in the heavenly Canaan soon enough.

The very act of faith that landed Joseph in Hebrews 11, the Faith Hall of Fame, was making his family swear they would take his bones out of Egypt when the Exodus would finally arrive. *“And Joseph took an oath of the children of Israel, saying, God will surely visit you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence”* (Genesis 50:25). That was 400 years in the future! Joseph's brothers and all their children and grandchildren would be long dead by that time. But it mattered to Joseph! Egypt was not, and would never, be home for Joseph. And Joseph got his desire fully satisfied as Moses took his bones when they left Egypt. *“Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear an oath. He had said, ‘God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place’”* (Exodus 13:19). That entire generation, Moses included, would die and be buried in the desert; but not Joseph! His bones were carried into the Promised Land and buried by Joshua. *“And Joseph's bones, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem...”* (Joshua 24:32).

Joseph was home at last! It was this future-focused faith that enabled Joseph to resist seduction, wait patiently, serve with integrity, live gratefully, forgive fully, and endure contentedly in a land he could never call home!

Job was completely mystified as to God's purpose in his suffering. It seemed that God had left him. But he kept his eyes on the future with the assurance of faith.

*"But if I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him. **But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.** My feet have closely followed his steps; I have kept to his way without turning aside. I have not departed from the commands of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread" (Job 23:8-12).*

Peter was told to expect to suffer and die for the name of Christ. Yet his future-focused faith shines in his exhortation to fellow sufferers.

*"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and **into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-- kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.** In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith-- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire-- may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor **when Jesus Christ is revealed**" (1 Peter 1:3-7).*

So, don't stop shoring up your faith by staying future-focused!

Priority #6 Don't Stop Sharing Your Struggle with Godly Friends Hebrews 13:1-3

*"**Keep on loving each other as brothers.** Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. **Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering**" (Hebrews 13:1-3). Severe and chronic suffering is often accompanied by the tendency to withdraw into depression and isolation. We don't want to fake it, so we hide. We don't want to face the potential pain of interaction, so we avoid. We are afraid of what we or others might say, so we stay away. We are exhausted by life and being around others seems too big an added burden to take on. But the very compassion, understanding and intercession we so desperately need, we guarantee we will never receive by our refusal to share the struggle with others.*

Job had friends. With all the pain they caused and mistakes they made, at least they showed up. Give them that. And they were reconciled at the end of it all. God made sure those friendships lasted!

David had Jonathan. His presence and encouragement were treasured by David beyond words. Friends who walk with you in your suffering are friends indeed.

Jesus had twelve disciple-friends. And among these, He had three special friends: Peter, James and John. When he entered the most severe suffering in his life, he called on them to walk with Him, and pray for Him. *“Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, ‘Sit here while I go over there and pray.’ He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me’”* (Matthew 26:36-38). Like Job’s friends, these friends failed Jesus in His time of deepest need. But the principle remains: *suffering people need friends close by to listen, love and pray for them.* If Job needed them, and David needed them, and even Jesus needed them, then we need them. Our friends will not be any more perfect than we are. But we need them just the same. So don’t stop sharing your struggle with godly friends.

Don’t sit back and wait for someone to reach out to you. Yes, they should have. No, they didn’t. But don’t get stuck in the blame game. Reach out to a few godly friends and ask them to listen to you, pray for you, and meet with you once a week for an hour or so. Three or four other mature believers who can hear your heart, speak truth, and pray fervently for you can make the life-changing difference you need so badly. And remember, the day will come when you’ll be that friend who is able to help others with the same help you now receive. If you don’t know who to ask to help you, then ask your pastor to help you find a small support group of mature believers to meet with you.

Let me suggest a format. First, someone opens the time in prayer for wisdom, grace and the Spirit’s leading. Second, interact with some of the following questions: “Tell us about yourself; share with us what you’re going through now.” “What has happened that has made it especially difficult?” “How has it affected you?” The first meeting may be the longest, so everyone is fully informed about who you are, what you’re going through, and what you’re facing. As the various needs are explained, be sure they take prayer requests that are specific and important to you. It would be good if they took turns checking in on you, to pray with you over the phone during the week, before you meet again as a group. Having a clear plan of action with a planned time to meet is important. You and your support group may meet weekly for a few months, then twice a month, then once a month. There is no way to determine ahead of time the length or frequency. God will make it clear as you follow Him through the process. But don’t stop sharing your struggle with godly friends.

Priority #7 Don’t Stop Staying the Course Hebrews 10:23, 35-39; 12:1-3

*“Let us **hold unswervingly** to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful”* (Hebrews 10:23). *“So **do not throw away your confidence**; it will be richly rewarded. **You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.** For in just a very little while, ‘He who is coming will come and will not delay. But **my righteous one will live by faith.** And if he shrinks*

back, I will not be pleased with him.' But we are **not of those who shrink back** and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved" (Hebrews 10:35-39).

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us **throw off everything that hinders** and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us **run with perseverance** the race marked out for us. Let us **fix our eyes on Jesus**, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, **so that you will not grow weary and lose heart**" (Hebrews 12:1-3).

"You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised."

Perseverance is not glamorous or exciting, but it is essential. It's like breathing. It may seem ordinary, but there is no life without it. To persevere is to continue on in obedience, to endure without giving up, to press on without quitting, to maintain the course without deviating. Perseverance is possible by the grace of God and essential for the glory of God. Don't rebel against the Lord, leave His chosen path or seek a sinful way out. It's hard, perhaps the hardest thing you've ever done, but keep trusting and obeying through it all. Spend time meditating and praying through the following verses that call us to persevere in following our Savior in the midst of our suffering.

"Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces **perseverance...**" (Romans 5:3).

Romans 15:4 "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through **endurance** and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

"May the God who gives **endurance** and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus..." (Romans 15:5).

"If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient **endurance** of the same sufferings we suffer" (2 Corinthians 1:6).

"...being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have **great endurance and patience...**" (Colossians 1:11).

"We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your **endurance** inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 1:3).

"Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your **perseverance** and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are **enduring**" (2 Thessalonians 1:4).

"May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's **perseverance**" (2 Thessalonians 3:5).

"But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, **endurance** and gentleness" (1 Timothy 6:11).

"**Endure hardship** with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 2:3).

"Therefore I **endure** everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory" (2 Timothy 2:10).

"...if we **endure**, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us..." (2 Timothy 2:12).

“You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, **endurance**...” (2 Timothy 3:10).

“But you, keep your head in all situations, **endure** hardship...” (2 Timothy 4:5).

“Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in **endurance**” (Titus 2:2).

“You need to **persevere** so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised” (Hebrews 10:36).

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with **perseverance** the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1).

“**Endure** hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons” (Hebrews 12:7).

“...because you know that the testing of your faith develops **perseverance**” (James 1:3).

“**Perseverance** must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:4).

“As you know, we consider blessed those who have **persevered**. You have heard of Job's **perseverance** and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy” (James 5:11).

“...and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, **perseverance**; and to **perseverance**, godliness...” (2 Peter 1:6).

“I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and **patient endurance** that are ours in Jesus...” (Revelation 1:9).

“I know your deeds, your hard work and your **perseverance**...” (Revelation 2:2).

“I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and **perseverance**...” (Revelation 2:19).

“Since you have kept my command to **endure patiently**, I will also keep you from the hour of trial...” (Revelation 3:10).

“If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed the sword, with the sword he will be killed. This calls for **patient endurance and faithfulness** on the part of the saints” (Revelation 13:10).

“This calls for **patient endurance** on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus” (Revelation 14:12).

From start to finish, the call is the same. Keep following Jesus.

“As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ‘Come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will make you fishers of men.’ At once they left their nets and followed him” (Matthew 4:18-20).

Peter commenced His journey of faith by responding to the call of Jesus to follow. “Follow me and I will make you...” That is how we are shaped and fashioned. This journey is a following after our Lord and Savior. He plans the path; we follow. He determines the direction; we follow. He chooses the course; we follow. Peter had no idea where this journey would lead him. Surely he never imagined this journey

would bring so much joy or pain, so much opportunity or opposition, so much success or failure. Neither did we in our journey. But the same Lord calls His own to follow just the same.

Peter did not always follow as well as he should have. But he never quit! His pride would raise its ugly head only to be rebuked time and again. Satan would attack and fear would overtake him and lead him to deny knowing Christ. Jesus would rebuke and restore him again and again. John 21 records the final restoration of Peter on the shores of Galilee.

“When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ He said to him a second time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ and he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.’ (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’

“Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, ‘Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?’ When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, what about this man?’ Jesus said to him, ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!’” (John 21:15-21 ESV).

After reconfirming Peter’s call to serve Him, as Jesus and Peter walk on the shore, the Savior reveals to Peter that he will have a future opportunity to replace his former denial with proof of the love he had confessed. Jesus shows Peter that he will die a martyr’s death at his journey’s end. The Lord then concluded this revelation with the identical command He gave Peter way back at the beginning, “Follow me.”

Same spot: Galilee.

Same setting: After fishing all night, catching nothing. (Luke 5:1-11)

Same assignment: “Follow me.”

In the shock of the sobering realization of his future martyrdom, Peter turns around to look at the other apostles. Seeing John following, he asks Jesus about his future. Jesus makes His point to Peter in unmistakable terms, that this is none of his business. What Jesus does with His own is His business, not ours. Our business is to keep on following Him. Don’t compare. Don’t despair. Just prepare... to keep on following Christ. It will not be easy, but it will be clear. Just make the next good decision to stay the course and follow your Savior one more day.

Appendix 1

Suffering as God's Discipline for Disobedience or Continuing Consequences for Foolish Choices

While much of the believer's suffering is not the result of divine discipline for sin, some of it is. And though we have not dealt directly with suffering as God's discipline for sinful disobedience or as ongoing consequences for foolish choices, no study on suffering would be complete without addressing it at least briefly.

Suffering As a Natural Consequence of Sinful Choices

Some of the suffering occasioned by sinful choices is what might be called naturally consequential. That is, when weed seeds are sown, weeds will grow. *"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction..."* (Galatians 6:7-8).

When we sow the seeds of sin and disobedience, the fruit will be bitter, whether it grows quickly or slowly. This is the concept revealed in Romans 1:24, 26 and 28 underscored by the phrase, "God gave them over...." The meaning is obvious and frightening. God did not actively or immediately punish them. Instead, He allowed them to go their own evil way, making their own decisions to sin, and letting the natural consequences follow. These consequences are earthly and temporal. But there is also foreshadowed an active, consequential wrath of God's judgment that will follow. Some of these natural, bitter consequences of sin are seen in the following biblical examples:

Jacob's deceiving of Isaac and Esau's murderous hatred leading to fierce family conflict

Pharaoh's arrogance leading to plagues on Egypt and the death of him and his army in the Red Sea

Achan's greed and deceit leading to the death of 36 soldiers, then his death and the death of his family

The Prodigal Son's foolish, wasteful, and immoral choices so that he ended up poor, ashamed and alone

Judas' greedy choice bringing shame and suicidal despair after he betrayed Jesus

Suffering as Active Discipline for Sin

God brings the discipline of suffering for sinful choices because of His love for you. If this is your experience, take heart. Your sin may be deep and your discipline heavy, but that heavy hand of discipline is nail-pierced and tender and motivated by love for you.

"Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you" (Deuteronomy 8:5).

"And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son'" (Hebrews 12:5-6).

Some examples of God's active discipline intended to bring repentance in the lives of His own are seen in these biblical examples:

Adam and Eve - their guilt, fear, and panic occasioned by the Spirit in their hearts after they sinned

Moses not entering Canaan due to his arrogant pride and anger

Aaron not entering Canaan due to his leading Israel into idolatry

Miriam contracting leprosy and not entering Canaan due to her slander and arrogance against Moses' wife

David's sin with Bathsheba - Psalm 32, Psalm 51, 2 Samuel 11

The stricken conscience and spiritual desperation brought about by the conviction of the Spirit

The sending of the prophet Nathan to David to confront, rebuke, and bring him to repentance and

then comfort David with the assurance of forgiveness, followed by the death of David's son

Uzziah's leprosy after his arrogant presumption to offer incense like the priests (2 Chronicles 26:19)

Peter's shame and tears after denying Christ followed by Christ's confrontation in Galilee

We may not be able to distinguish between natural consequences and divine discipline in every case. What is certain, however, in the life of a believer is that all consequences of sin are discipline from a loving Father. All sin bears bitter fruit and must be repented of. Let us learn to respond to the inner rebuke of the Holy Spirit with a tender conscience like David who when cutting off Saul's robe (when Saul sought to cut off David's head!) was immediately convicted that this was a sin of disrespect and quickly repented and spoke to Saul in humility. What a contrast between such a tender conscience in the desert and his blatant, unrepentant, months' long rebellion in his adultery with Bathsheba, leading from one sin to another and resulting in horrific consequences. Let us plead with God for an ever-tender conscience and extreme sensitivity to His Spirit that we might repent at the first thought of sin.

When your suffering is a result of sinful choices, repent.

Do not listen to Satan's lies: "There's no going back." "It too late." "You've committed the unpardonable sin." "What's the use? You've tried this before." "It's hopeless."

There is forgiveness full and free in the blood of Christ. Every consequence may not be removed, but the discipline will be. You need not fear the Father will not receive his repentant prodigal. He will run to you if you will only repent and return.

As you evaluate what it means to repent and seek restoration, prayerfully seek good, biblical counsel to work through the ramifications of the results of your sinful choices. In addition to first confessing your sin to Christ and receiving His forgiveness and cleansing (1 John 1:9) who else needs to hear an apology from you (individuals or church family), and what other things need to be made right to move beyond the sin in a full and complete way? A basic rule is, "If the sin is public, the repentance should be public. If the sin is private, the repentance should be private." A clean conscience demands full repentance and seeking restoration in so far as you are able. Some consequences may remain, but the joy of a clean conscience is a treasure beyond measure. Read again Psalm 51 in its entirety.

Appendix 2 Scripture Review

Key Chapters to Review

Job 1-2, 42

2 Corinthians 1, 5, 12

Psalms 61, 62, 73, 131

Philippians 1, 2, 3, 4

Lamentations 3

Hebrews 2, 4, 5, 11, 12

James 1, 4, 5

1 Peter 1, 4, 5

Key Verses to Review

Job 23:10

Psalms 116:3-6

Psalms 119:67, 73

Isaiah 48:10

Romans 5:3-5

Romans 12:12

2 Corinthians 1:3-7

2 Corinthians 4:17-18

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Philippians 1:12-14

Hebrews 2:18

Hebrews 5:8

James 1:2-4

1 Peter 1:6-7

1 Peter 4:12-13

Key Characters to Study

Job Joseph Moses Naomi & Ruth David Elijah Hosea Jeremiah Jonah Jesus

Mary & Martha Peter Paul

Appendix 3 Hymns for Suffering Saints

OLDER HYMNS

AFFLICTIONS DO NOT COME ALONE

John Newton

Afflictions do not come alone,
A voice attends the rod;
By both He to His saints is known,
A Father and a God!

The wicked I perhaps may leave
Awhile, and not reprove;
But all the children I receive
I scourge, because I love.

I see your hearts, at present, filled
With grief, and deep distress;
But soon these bitter seeds shall yield
The fruits of righteousness.

Break through the clouds, dear Lord, and shine!
Let us perceive Thee nigh!
And to each mourning child of Thine
These gracious words apply.

ALL YOUR ANXIETY

Edward H. Joy

Is there a heart o'erbound by sorrow?
Is there a life weighed down by care?
Come to the cross, each burden bearing;
All your anxiety—leave it there.

*All your anxiety, all your care,
Bring to the mercy seat, leave it there,
Never a burden He cannot bear,
Never a friend like Jesus!*

No other friend so swift to help you,
No other friend so quick to hear,
No other place to leave your burden,
No other one to hear your prayer.

Come then at once; delay no longer!
Heed His entreaty kind and sweet,
You need not fear a disappointment;
You shall find peace at the mercy seat.

BE STILL MY SOUL

Katharina von Schlegel

Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side.
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change, He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heavenly Friend
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Be still, my soul: thy God doth undertake
To guide the future, as He has the past.
Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;
All now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
His voice Who ruled them while He dwelt below.

Be still, my soul: when dearest friends depart,
And all is darkened in the vale of tears,
Then shalt thou better know His love, His heart,
Who comes to soothe thy sorrow and thy fears.
Be still, my soul: thy Jesus can repay
From His own fullness all He takes away.

Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on
When we shall be forever with the Lord.
When disappointment, grief and fear are gone,
Sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past
All safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

Be still, my soul: begin the song of praise
On earth, believing, to Thy Lord on high;
Acknowledge Him in all thy words and ways,
So shall He view thee with a well pleased eye.
Be still, my soul: the Sun of life divine
Through passing clouds shall but more brightly shine.

DAY BY DAY

Carolina Sandell Berg

Day by day, and with each passing moment,
Strength I find to meet my trials here;
Trusting in my Father's wise bestowment,
I've no cause for worry or for fear.
He, whose heart is kind beyond all measure,
Gives unto each day what He deems best,
Lovingly its part of pain and pleasure,
Mingling toil with peace and rest.

Every day the Lord Himself is near me,
With a special mercy for each hour;
All my cares He fain would bear and cheer me,
He whose name is Counsellor and Pow'r.
The protection of His child and treasure
Is a charge that on Himself He laid;
"As thy days, thy strength shall be in measure,"
This the pledge to me He made.

Help me then, in every tribulation,
So to trust Thy promises, O Lord,
That I lose not faith's sweet consolation,
Offered me within Thy holy Word.
Help me, Lord, when toil and trouble meeting,
E'er to take, as from a father's hand,
One by one, the days, the moments fleeting,
Till with Christ the Lord I stand.

FROM EVERY STORMY WIND

Hugh Stowell

From every stormy wind that blows,
From every swelling tide of woes,
There is a calm, a sure retreat;
'Tis found beneath the mercy seat.

There is a place where Jesus sheds
The oil of gladness on our heads;
A place than all besides more sweet;
It is the blood bought mercy seat.

There is a scene where spirits blend,
Where friend holds fellowship with friend;
Though sundered far, by faith they meet
Around one common mercy seat.

There, there, on eagles' wings we soar,
And time and sense seem all no more;
And heaven comes down, our souls to greet,
And glory crowns the mercy seat.

GOD HAS NOT PROMISED

Annie Flint

God hath not promised skies always blue,
Flower strewn pathways all our lives through;
God hath not promised sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.

*But God hath promised strength for the day,
Rest for the labor, light for the way,
Grace for the trials, help from above,
Unfailing sympathy, undying love.*

God hath not promised we shall not know
Toil and temptation, trouble and woe;
He hath not told us we shall not bear
Many a burden, many a care.

God hath not promised smooth roads and wide,
Swift, easy travel, needing no guide;
Never a mountain rocky and steep,
Never a river turbid and deep.

GOD LEADS US ALONG

George A. Young

In shady, green pastures, so rich and so sweet,
God leads His dear children along;
Where the water's cool flow bathes the weary one's feet,
God leads His dear children along.

*Some through the waters, some through the flood,
Some through the fire, but all through the blood;
Some through great sorrow, but God gives a song,
In the night season and all the day long.*

Sometimes on the mount where the sun shines so bright,
God leads His dear children along;
Sometimes in the valley, in darkest of night,
God leads His dear children along.

Though sorrows befall us and evils oppose,
God leads His dear children along;
Through grace we can conquer, defeat all our foes,
God leads His dear children along.

Away from the mire, and away from the clay,
God leads His dear children along;
Away up in glory, eternity's day,
God leads His dear children along.

HE KNOWS

Emma G. Dietrich

Oh, aching heart, with sorrow torn,
Thy Lord is near and knows;
He knows it all—the feet way worn,
The weary cares and woes,
The load of grief in anguish borne,
The Lord is near, He knows.

Oh, fainting soul, with doubts oppressed,
Thy Lord is near and knows;
He knows it all—how thou art pressed
On every side with foes;
He waits to be thy cherished guest;
The Lord is near, He knows.

Oh, weary head, that fain would rest,
Thy Lord is near and knows;
He knows it all, and on His breast
Thou mayest now repose;
Drop every care at His behest,
The Lord is near, He knows.

Oh, lonely one, live thou thy best,
Thy Lord is near and knows;
He knows it all, sees every test,
Yes, every tear that flows;
Rejoice, faint heart, His way is best,
Thy Lord is near, He knows.

HOW FIRM A FOUNDATION

John Keith

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent word!
What more can He say than to you He hath said—
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

“Fear not, I am with thee, oh, be not dismayed,
For I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;
I’ll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by My gracious, omnipotent hand.

“When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;
For I will be with thee thy trouble to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

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

“The soul that on Jesus doth lean for repose,
I will not, I will not, desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake.”

IT IS WELL

Horatio Spafford

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin—oh, the bliss of this glorious thought—
My sin—not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

But, Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming we wait,
The sky, not the grave, is our goal;
Oh trump of the angel! Oh voice of the Lord!
Blessèd hope, blessèd rest of my soul!

And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so—it is well with my soul.

LIKE A RIVER GLORIOUS

Frances Ridley Havergal

Like a river glorious is God's perfect peace,
Over all victorious, in its bright increase;
Perfect, yet it floweth fuller every day,
Perfect, yet it groweth deeper all the way.

*Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blest
Finding, as He promised, perfect peace and rest.*

Hidden in the hollow of His blessed hand,
Never foe can follow, never traitor stand;
Not a surge of worry, not a shade of care,
Not a blast of hurry touch the spirit there.

Every joy or trial falleth from above,
Traced upon our dial by the Sun of Love;
We may trust Him fully all for us to do;
They who trust Him wholly find Him wholly true.

OH, SAFE TO THE ROCK

William Cushing

Oh, safe to the Rock that is higher than I,
My soul in its conflicts and sorrows would fly,
So sinful, so weary, Thine, Thine would I be,
Thou blest Rock of Ages, I'm hiding in Thee.

Hiding in Thee, hiding in Thee,
Thou blest Rock of Ages, I'm hiding in Thee.

In the calm of the noontide, in sorrow's lone hour,
In times when temptation casts o'er me its power;
In the tempests of life, on its wide, heaving sea,
Thou blest Rock of Ages, I'm hiding in Thee.

How oft in the conflict, when pressed by the foe,
I have fled to my Refuge and breathed out my woe,,
How often, when trials like sea-billows roll,
Have I hidden in Thee, O Thou Rock of my soul.

PRECIOUS LORD, TAKE MY HAND

Thomas Dorsey

Precious Lord, take my hand,
Lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;
Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light:

*Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me home.*

When my way grows drear,
Precious Lord, linger near,
When my life is almost gone,
Hear my cry, hear my call,
Hold my hand lest I fall:

When the darkness appears
And the night draws near,
And the day is past and gone,
At the river I stand,
Guide my feet, hold my hand:

SOMEDAY HE'LL MAKE IT PLAIN
Lydia Leech

I do not know why oft 'round me
My hopes all shattered seem to be;
God's perfect plan I cannot see,
But some day I'll understand.

*Some day He'll make it plain to me,
Some day when I His face shall see;
Some day from tears I shall be free,
For some day I shall understand.*

I cannot tell the depth of love,
Which moves the Father's heart above;
My faith to test, my love to prove,
But some day I'll understand.

Tho' trials come thro' passing days,
My life will still be filled with praise;
For God will lead thro' darkened ways,
But some day I'll understand.

SOMETIME WE'LL UNDERSTAND
Maxwell Cornelius

Not now, but in the coming years,
It may be in the better land,
We'll read the meaning of our tears,
And there, some time, we'll understand.

*Then trust in God through all the days;
Fear not, for He doth hold thy hand;
Though dark thy way, still sing and praise,
Some time, some time we'll understand.*

We'll catch the broken thread again,
And finish what we here began;
Heav'n will the mysteries explain,
And then, ah then, we'll understand.

We'll know why clouds instead of sun
Were over many a cherished plan;
Why song has ceased when scarce begun;
'Tis there, some time, we'll understand.
Why what we long for most of all,
Eludes so oft our eager hand;
Why hopes are crushed and castles fall,
Up there, some time, we'll understand.

God knows the way, He holds the key,
He guides us with unerring hand;
Some time with tearless eyes we'll see;
Yes, there, up there, we'll understand.

SUN OF MY SOUL

John Keble

Sun of my soul, Thou Savior dear,
It is not night if Thou be near;
Oh, may no earthborn cloud arise
To hide Thee from Thy servant's eyes.

When the soft dews of kindly sleep
My wearied eyelids gently steep,
Be my last thought, how sweet to rest
Forever on my Savior's breast.

Abide with me from morn till eve,
For without Thee I cannot live;
Abide with me when night is nigh,
For without Thee I dare not die.

If some poor wand'ring child of Thine
Has spurned today the voice divine,
Now, Lord, the gracious work begin;
Let him no more lie down in sin.

Watch by the sick, enrich the poor
With blessings from Thy boundless store;
Be every mourner's sleep tonight,
Like infants' slumbers, pure and right.

Come near and bless us when we wake,
Ere through the world our way we take,
Till in the ocean of Thy love
We lose ourselves in Heav'n above.

TELL IT TO JESUS

Edmund Lorenz

Are you weary, are you heavy hearted?
Tell it to Jesus, tell it to Jesus.
Are you grieving over joys departed?
Tell it to Jesus alone.

*Tell it to Jesus, tell it to Jesus,
He is a friend that's well known.
You've no other such a friend or brother,
Tell it to Jesus alone.*

Do the tears flow down your cheeks unbidden?
Tell it to Jesus, tell it to Jesus.
Have you sins that to men's eyes are hidden?
Tell it to Jesus alone.

Do you fear the gathering clouds of sorrow?
Tell it to Jesus, tell it to Jesus.
Are you anxious what shall be tomorrow?
Tell it to Jesus alone.

Are you troubled at the thought of dying?
Tell it to Jesus, tell it to Jesus.
For Christ's coming kingdom are you sighing?
Tell it to Jesus alone.

CONTEMPORARY HYMNS

BLESSED BE YOUR NAME

Matt Redman

Blessed Be Your Name
In the land that is plentiful
Where Your streams of abundance flow
Blessed be Your name

Blessed Be Your name
When I'm found in the desert place
Though I walk through the wilderness
Blessed Be Your name

Every blessing You pour out
I'll turn back to praise
When the darkness closes in, Lord
Still I will say

Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be Your name
Blessed be the name of the Lord
Blessed be Your glorious name

Blessed be Your name
When the sun's shining down on me
When the world's 'all as it should be'
Blessed be Your name

Blessed be Your name
On the road marked with suffering
Though there's pain in the offering
Blessed be Your name

You give and take away
You give and take away
My heart will choose to say
Lord, blessed be Your name

BLESSINGS

Laura Story

We pray for blessings
We pray for peace
Comfort for family, protection while we sleep
We pray for healing, for prosperity
We pray for Your mighty hand to ease our suffering
All the while, You hear each spoken need
Yet love us way too much to give us lesser things

Cause what if Your blessings come through raindrops
What if Your healing comes through tears
What if a thousand sleepless nights
Are what it takes to know You're near
What if trials of this life are Your mercies in disguise

We pray for wisdom
Your voice to hear
And we cry in anger when we cannot feel You near
We doubt Your goodness, we doubt Your love
As if every promise from Your Word is not enough
All the while, You hear each desperate plea
And long that we'd have faith to believe

When friends betray us
When darkness seems to win
We know the pain reminds this heart
That this is not, this is not our home

Cause what if Your blessings come through raindrops
What if Your healing comes through tears
And what if a thousand sleepless nights
Are what it takes to know You're near
What if my greatest disappointments
Or the aching of this life
Is the revealing of a greater thirst this world can't satisfy
And what if trials of this life
The rain, the storms, the hardest nights
Are Your mercies in disguise

WHEN TRIALS COME

Keith & Kristyn Getty

When trials come no longer fear
For in the pain our God draws near
To fire a faith worth more than gold
And there His faithfulness is told
And there His faithfulness is told

Within the night I know Your peace
The breath of God brings strength to me
And new each morning mercy flows
As treasures of the darkness grow
As treasures of the darkness grow

I turn to Wisdom not my own
For every battle You have known
My confidence will rest in You
Your love endures Your ways are good
Your love endures Your ways are good

When I am weary with the cost
I see the triumph of the cross
So in it's shadow I shall run
Till You complete the work begun
Till You complete the work begun

One day all things will be made new
I'll see the hope You called me to
And in your kingdom paved with gold
I'll praise your faithfulness of old
I'll praise your faithfulness of old

HOW CAN I KEEP FROM SINGING

Chris Tomlin

There is an endless song
Echoes in my soul
I hear the music ring

And though the storms may come
I am holding on
To the rock I cling

How can I keep from singing Your praise
How can I ever say enough
How amazing is Your love
How can I keep from shouting Your name
I know I am loved by the King
And it makes my heart want to sing

I will lift my eyes
In the darkest night
For I know my Savior lives

And I will walk with You
Knowing You'll see me through
And sing the songs You give

I can sing in the troubled times
Sing when I win
I can sing when I lose my step
And fall down again
I can sing 'cause You pick me up
Sing 'cause You're there
I can sing 'cause You hear me, Lord
When I call to You in prayer
I can sing with my last breath
Sing for I know
That I'll sing with the angels
And the saints around the throne

I WILL RISE
Chris Tomlin

There's a peace I've come to know
Though my heart and flesh may fail
There's an anchor for my soul
I can say, it is well

Jesus has overcome
And the grave is overwhelmed
The victory is won
He is risen from the dead

And I will rise when He calls my name
No more sorrow, no more pain
I will rise on eagle's wings
Before my God, fall on my knees
And rise, I will rise

There's a day that's drawing near
When this darkness breaks to light
And the shadows disappear
And my faith shall be my eyes

Jesus has overcome
And the grave is overwhelmed
The victory is won
He is risen from the dead

And I will rise when He calls my name
No more sorrow, no more pain

I will rise on eagle's wings
Before my God, fall on my knees
And rise, I will rise

And I hear the voice of many angels sing
Worthy is the Lamb
And I hear the cry of every longing heart
Worthy is the Lamb

I will rise when He calls my name
No more sorrow, no more pain
I will rise on eagle's wings
Before my God, fall on my knees
And rise, I will rise, I will rise

EVERLASTING GOD
Chris Tomlin

Strength will rise as we wait upon the Lord
We will wait upon the Lord
We will wait upon the Lord

Our God, You reign forever
Our hope, our Strong Deliverer
You are the everlasting God
The everlasting God
You do not faint
You won't grow weary

Our God, You reign forever
Our hope, our Strong Deliverer
You are the everlasting God
The everlasting God
You do not faint
You won't grow weary
You're the defender of the weak
You comfort those in need
You lift us up on wings like eagles

PSALM 62 MY SOUL FINDS REST

Aaron Keyes

My soul finds rest in God alone,
My Rock and my salvation,
A fortress strong against my foes,
And I will not be shaken.
Though lips may bless and hearts may curse,
And lies like arrows pierce me,
I'll fix my heart on righteousness,
I'll look to Him who hears me.

And trust in Him completely;
With every day pour out my soul,
And He will prove His mercy.
Though life is but a fleeting breath,
A sigh too brief to measure,
My King has crushed the curse of death
And I am His forever.
O praise Him, hallelujah, My Delight and my Reward;
Everlasting, never failing, My Redeemer, my God.
I'll set my gaze on God alone,

O praise Him, hallelujah, My Delight and my Reward;
Everlasting, never failing, My Redeemer, my God.

O praise Him, hallelujah, My Delight and my Reward;
Everlasting, never failing, My Redeemer, my God.

O praise Him, O praise Him, hallelujah, hallelujah,
O praise Him, O praise Him, hallelujah, hallelujah,
O praise Him, O praise Him, hallelujah! hallelujah!

O praise Him, hallelujah, My Delight and my Reward;
Everlasting, never failing, My Redeemer, my God.

Amid the world's temptations;
When evil seeks to take a hold
I'll cling to my salvation.
Though riches come and riches go,
Don't set your heart upon them;
The fields of hope in which I sow
Are harvested in heaven. O praise Him, hallelujah, My Delight and my Reward;
Everlasting, never failing, My Redeemer, my God.
Find rest, my soul, in God alone

Appendix 4 Devotional Meditation

Rebuked by a Robin Only One Song

"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" (Matthew 6:25-26).

For the last few years here in south-central Pennsylvania we have joked that we don't get winter anymore. It really seemed that way with temperatures rivaling those of North Carolina for the last three winters. Then came this winter! We have had record sustained cold, ice storms, and repeated snow storms with ever-increasing accumulations. The other day I was outside shoveling once again and looked up to see a pair of robins! They flew into our large fir tree and began to sing... the same song they sing in the warmth of spring and summer. They had no food, no materials to make a nest, and no likelihood for any improvement for a month or more. Yet, they sang out, loud and clear, the praises of their Creator. Robins have but one song... north or south, sunshine or storm, warm or cold, hungry or satisfied... one lovely, loud, clear song of praise. I was rebuked! It seems I have many songs... songs of praise and songs of self-pity, songs of God's grace and songs of my grumblings. I am in the midst of preaching a series out of Exodus and Numbers called "Discoveries in Desert Places." Israel was filled with the same malady as me.... too many songs. One was a song of praise (Exodus 15), but it would seem that all the rest were well practiced and always off key... songs of murmuring complaint, bitter sarcasm, anger and rebellion. Let's learn the lessons the Holy Spirit intended for us from these off key and miserable murmurings, and return to that one song of our worthy God, no matter the season, no matter the storm.

This exhortation is not meant to silence real questions, ignore deep pain, stifle honest confusion, or pretend that other "songs" that arise from the sufferings of this life aren't legitimate. The book of Psalms proves that point. But let's not forget the one song that our God is worthy of every day, and to sing it louder and longer than all the rest.

Job had One Song

"At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.' In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing" (Job 1:20).

He sang that one song through tears and a broken heart. His suffering didn't change his song, because his suffering didn't change his Savior. Job didn't wait until everything made sense before he lifted up his voice in that one song. The devil was sure that suffering would silence the song. The devil was wrong. So are we if we let anything silence our One Song to our worthy God.

The Four Living Creatures have One Song

"Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back.

"The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come'" (Revelation 4:6-8).

The Twenty-Four Elders have One Song

"Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being'" (Revelation 4:9).

The Victorious Tribulation Saints have One Song

"And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb: 'Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages. Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed'" (Revelation 15:2).

In every case, the "One Song" is a song of praise and adoration to the worthiness of our God. The caverns of our present conflicts only make that One Song echo louder and longer. Let's listen to the robin's song in the snow and take up the chorus today.... "You are worthy, O God! Worthy yesterday. Worthy today. Worthy every day. Worthy forever."

One Song

Ron Berrus, 2014

I have but one song I will sing
To Christ my Savior and my King
For He is worthy of my praise
Forever more through endless days

This is the one song that I sing
In days of green and lavish spring
It is the same in days of snow
When winter's chill is all I know

When blessings fall like gentle dew
My heart is filled with praise to You
But when with broken heart I come
This song remains, this song is one

'Tis to the Lamb this song I sing
Who changes not, to Him I bring
This song of praise for His great love
Here on this earth, and heav'n above

One song I lift to Him alone
The Worthy One upon the throne
Soon every knee to Him shall bow
And tongue His Lordship shall avow

If He forever is the same
Then this one song shall e'er remain
In life and death His praise I'll sing
My humble, heartfelt offering

O worthy, worthy is the Lamb
Who died and rose to life again
And by His blood has set me free
To Him be praise eternally

Self Check:

- 1) What song have you been singing most often this last week, month, year?
- 2) What changes have been particularly hard for you to accept and adjust to?
- 3) Have you purposefully determined to focus on God's changeless glory in the midst of the difficult changes?
- 4) Consider writing your own "One Song" of praise - keep it short, simple and sincere! I'd love to read it if you write one. Remember - it's your song to your God. It's not about impressing men, but about blessing God!

For Further Study: Job 1, Psalm 106, Psalm 73, Habakkuk 3:17-19

"Father in heaven, You are worthy of my praise each and every day. Forgive me for the shallowness of my circumstantial praise... that grows loud in the midst of plenty and then goes silent in days of loss. I accept the robin's rebuke and repent of my fickle ways. Let my praise to Thee not be silent in the storm. May my one song, my constant song, be a song of praise for Your unchanging grace. In the name of the always and ever-worthy Lamb I pray. Amen."

Seeing The Invisible,
embracing The Unapproachable,
declaring The Unexplainable,
changed by The Immutable,
running after The Irresistible
with inexhaustible joy in our inexpressible sorrows,
spending our time on eternity,
owning nothing yet possessing everything that matters and lasts.
We are Pilgrims in Paradox.
Welcome to THE JOURNEY!