



THE DISCIPLINE OF SUFFERING

WEEK 12
08.20.17

FOCUS VERSE

Psalm 119:71

It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes.

LESSON TEXT

Job 19:25-27

25 For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth:

26 And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God:

27 Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me.

Romans 5:3-5

3 And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience;

4 And patience, experience; and experience, hope:

5 And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.

Romans 8:35-39

35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

36 As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

37 Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.

38 For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,

39 Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.



FOCUS THOUGHT

Suffering teaches
us to trust in God's
unfailing love.



CULTURE CONNECTION

Getting Down to Business

Going out of business has been a struggle as far back as the fortune-tellers losing their trade when Paul cast the demon out of the slave girl. No business owners like to lose a business they have worked hard to develop, as Paul and his fellow laborers learned from the outraged idol makers in Ephesus. Businesses might fail because of poor management, lack of investors, or market instability. Others close their doors because of a strong stand for godly morals.

It does not seem just or fair that viable businesses should close down because they stand for God's definition of marriage and refuse to participate in homosexual weddings. When societies turn against what is pure and moral, God's people will suffer. Believers live

for God and not profit margins.

All who live for God will suffer rejection and persecution. Sharing the message of Christ in the workplace has caused some to feel the cold shoulder of indifference and icy silence around the water cooler. Like the oppression Nehemiah and his crews faced when rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, outsiders take offense at new believers who make changes that draw a distinction between them and the world. We do not know what we might face tomorrow or further down the road. What we do know is in whom we have believed. Regardless of what curves life throws, believers can walk in confidence that though life includes suffering and trouble, the One who suffered for them will bring them through.

OUTLINE

- I. OCCASION FOR REJOICING
- II. NOAH, DANIEL, AND JOB
- III. OTHER CAUSES FOR SUFFERING
- IV. EMBRACING SUFFERING AS A FRIEND
- V. A GOD-HONORING RESPONSE TO SUFFERING

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

To live is to suffer. This is a consequence of the Fall in the Garden of Eden, and it will not be reversed until we enter into the presence of our Lord. From beginning to end, the biblical story is of godly men and women who learned to trust God when it hurt.

Even Hebrews 11, often called "The Hall of Faith," is the story of some heroes of faith who suffered without relief in this world and other heroes of faith who suffered in the midst of miracles. Abel was murdered. Noah was ridiculed. Abraham's wife was kidnapped; Abraham was forsaken by Lot, his nephew;

Abraham was one hundred years old before his promised son was born; the tension between Ishmael and Isaac was so great Abraham had to send Ishmael and his mother away; and God tested Abraham by asking him to offer Isaac. Moses chose to "suffer affliction with the people of God" rather than "to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season" (Hebrews 11:25). One of the things we learn in Hebrews 11 is that even the kind of faith that results in miracles does not exempt us from suffering.

It is common for us to put a premium on being pain free. We do not like pain, and we do not like problems we cannot quickly solve. This view of life has given birth to a multi-billion dollar industry of medicines, potions, and elixirs that promise to free us from pain. Self-help books offer the assurance of a quick fix for life's problems. This is not to suggest it is wrong to accept palliative care when needed or to reject helpful advice when seeking solutions to difficult circumstances. But there is no biblical promise that we will ever on this earth completely escape the consequences of the brokenness that entered the world with the rebellion of our ancestors Adam and Eve.

“Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned” (Romans 5:12).

This reference to “death by sin” refers to God’s warning to Adam: “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Genesis 2:16–17). The death in view here is not merely physical death, but spiritual death, separation from fellowship with God. As Paul put it, “And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). To the Colossians, he wrote, “And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses” (Colossians 2:13).

Adam’s disobedience resulted in negative spiritual consequences for all, but it also caused physical decay leading to death. God had placed in the Garden of Eden the Tree of Life, which would have assured eternal life and presumably everlasting health. But as a consequence of sin, the way to this tree was barred.

“And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life” (Genesis 3:22–24).

Although we find redemption through Christ’s work on the cross, we still live in a fallen world among fallen people. This guarantees a dimension of suffering; we no longer live in Eden. And though we have the promise of healing in addition to our salvation, some healing will await the resurrection, for all die.

“And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27).

“So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. . . . For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Corinthians 15:42–44, 53–54).

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. OCCASION FOR REJOICING

The biblical perspective on suffering is that it should be an occasion for rejoicing, not for questioning God or giving up hope.

“And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us” (Romans 5:3–5).

In the mid-twentieth century, a woman asked an Apostolic pastor to pray that God would give her patience. He began to pray something like this: “Oh God, I pray that you would give this woman tribulation.” She was shocked and reminded him that she wanted patience, not tribulation. The pastor informed her that patience was the result of tribulation.

The Greek word translated *tribulation* has within its range of meaning the idea of pressure. Perhaps in today’s world we could extend that notion to the common problem of stress. Our culture has many stress points, including family relationships, job responsibilities, financial crises, health concerns, violence, and so forth. The media’s constant

bombardment of bad news enhances the problem. Pressure or stress alone will not produce patience. To understand Paul's point, we must examine the context of his words.

"Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:1-2).

Pressure will produce patience when we respond to the pressure with faith in God. Peace with God results in inner peace, which enables a person to trust God regardless of the circumstances of life. This is genuine faith. When we respond to the stresses of life with faith in God, the result is patience, a valuable virtue.

"Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise" (Hebrews 10:35-36).

Paul was not alone in his awareness of the value of suffering in relationship to patience.

"My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing" (James 1:2-4).

The word translated *temptations* here is different from the word translated *tribulations* in Romans 5:3. This word indicates an attempt "to learn the nature or character of someone or something by submitting such to thorough and extensive testing" (Louw-Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*).

God sends tests, not because He needs to learn about us, but because we need to learn about us. Trials of faith show our hidden weaknesses thus giving us opportunities for unexpected growth as we respond to the tests in faith. Without the patience that results from responding to temptations in faith, we

cannot be perfect and entire. There will still be dimensions of our spiritual lives that are deficient.

II. NOAH, DANIEL, AND JOB

Job's test was so remarkable that even those who do not know much about the Bible are familiar with the phrase "the patience of Job." Job never knew the reason for his suffering. His faith response to suffering places him in an elite group of Old Testament heroes.

"Though these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they should deliver but their own souls by their righteousness, saith the Lord GOD. . . . Though these three men were in it, as I live, saith the Lord GOD, they shall deliver neither sons nor daughters; they only shall be delivered, but the land shall be desolate. . . . Though Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, as I live, saith the Lord GOD, they shall deliver neither son nor daughter; they shall but deliver their own souls by their righteousness" (Ezekiel 14:14, 16, 20).

Why is Job compared with Noah and Daniel? The most obvious thing we notice is that none of the three men suffered because they had done something wrong.

"But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD. These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God" (Genesis 6:8-9).

"Then said Daniel unto the king, O king, live for ever. My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me: forasmuch as before him innocency was found in me; and also before thee, O king, have I done no hurt" (Daniel 6:21-22).

"There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil. . . . And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?" (Job 1:1, 8).

Noah was just and perfect. Daniel was innocent in God's eyes. Job was a perfect, upright man who feared God and avoided evil. This does not mean any of these men were sinless. Noah was discovered drunk by his son Ham. Daniel acknowledged his sin and confessed it to God. (See Daniel 9:20.) God rebuked Job for his words, leading to Job's confession. (See Job 38:2; 40:1–5.) But when James, who was writing to a Jewish audience, wanted to single out one man from among all the prophets as an example of patience, Job was that man.

"Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy" (James 5:10–11).

Job is a model of genuine faith. His trust in God was such that even after losing his massive wealth, his ten children, the support and encouragement of his wife, and his health, he uttered these immortal words: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15).

Satan was convinced people serve God only for the benefits they receive. (See Job 1:9–12.) But after two futile attempts to prove his theory, Satan never showed up again in the Book of Job. The context of this encounter between Satan and the Lord indicates God accepted Satan's challenge in order to prove that a person of genuine faith will trust God regardless of life's circumstances. We should also keep in mind that even though God rewarded Job's faith by blessing him beyond his loss, nothing in the blessing could erase the pain of the loss of his first ten children.

III. OTHER CAUSES FOR SUFFERING

In addition to the possibility that some suffering may be God's test of our faith, there are other sources of suffering. One of those is rejection by those who do not share our faith. Jesus explained this could happen.

"Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send

peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household" (Matthew 10:34–36).

This is not, of course, what Jesus wanted. It is frequently pointed out in the letters of the New Testament that believers should live in peace with each other. (For example, see Ephesians 4:3; I Thessalonians 5:13; Hebrews 12:14; James 3:18; I Peter 3:11.) The point is that where there are those within a family who reject Jesus, their rejection of Him sets them at odds against those in the family who believe in Him. Jesus Himself experienced the rejection of His siblings, who did not believe He was the Messiah.

"His brethren therefore said unto him, Depart hence, and go into Judaea, that thy disciples also may see the works that thou doest. For there is no man that doeth any thing in secret, and he himself seeketh to be known openly. If thou do these things, shew thyself to the world. For neither did his brethren believe in him" (John 7:3–5).

Suffering may also arise from disappointment with those you love. Betrayal results in a devastating sense of loss. Jesus warned His disciples of the distressing events that would characterize the future.

"Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another" (Matthew 24:9–10).

Throughout Christian history, these behaviors have contributed to physical, mental, and emotional suffering. Many believers today could identify with Paul in his sense of loneliness and emotional woundedness.

"For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica. . . . Alexander the

coppersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works: Of whom be thou ware also; for he hath greatly withstood our words” (II Timothy 4:10, 14–15).

Suffering may also result from weakness or sickness God does not choose to heal. In these cases, we can seek medical help to relieve the suffering while at the same time valuing the spiritual benefits that can result from pain. Examples of suffering Timothy and Paul experienced clarify this response.

“Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach’s sake and thine of-ten infirmities” (I Timothy 5:23).

Paul’s advice to Timothy reveals that Timothy suffered from ongoing sickness of an apparently digestive nature. No doubt Paul prayed for Timothy’s healing, but he was not healed. Rather than telling Timothy he must continue to suffer without relief, Paul suggested a possible remedy. It is probably no stretch of the imagination to think this advice could have first come from Luke, the beloved physician who traveled with Paul. (See Colossians 4:14.)

Timothy’s infirmity seems to be simply a physical problem, but Paul himself suffered an infirmity connected with his spiritual well-being. It would not yield to prayer, and apparently no physical relief was available.

“And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong” (II Corinthians 12:7–10).

The revelations Paul received put him in danger of pride. This is such a debilitating sin that the Lord allowed Satan to abuse him in order to ward off the arrogance that can result from a wrong response to spiritual experiences. (See II Corinthians 12:1–6.)

We can speculate about the nature of Paul’s thorn in the flesh, but regardless of its nature, it was a messenger from Satan. However, God used this to develop in Paul the character that would prevent his fall into pride and be Paul’s greatest strength. This was a commitment to glory in his weakness, allowing God’s strength to be made perfect in him.

The idea presented in the account of Paul’s thorn in the flesh is not that we should be willing to embrace weakness only if it is absolutely necessary. It is that weakness is the only way to authentic spiritual strength. The greater our weakness, the greater the opportunity for the power of Christ to rest upon us. The more fully we recognize our inabilities, the more we experience Christ’s abilities.

IV. EMBRACING SUFFERING AS A FRIEND

People of great faith in the Bible were people who knew how to rejoice in suffering. They learned how to embrace suffering as a friend. For example, David said, “It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes” (Psalm 119:71). When responded to in faith, there is something about an experience of suffering that enables a person to reassess what is important in life and to be reoriented to things of eternal value.

Since we are human, we will suffer. But in our humanity, the power of God is at work to save us from despair. Here is how Paul put it:

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus’ sake, that the life also of Jesus might

be made manifest in our mortal flesh. So then death worketh in us, but life in you” (II Corinthians 4:7–12).

At first, it seems that trouble, perplexity, persecution, and the ongoing experience of death’s nearness would surely result in distress, despair, and a sense of forsakenness and destruction. But this was not the case for Paul. He had discovered the “excellency of the power of God” in the midst of human weakness. Later in this context, he explained how this worked.

“For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (II Corinthians 4:16–18).

For Paul, suffering was a friend because of its eternal value. It produced in him something much more significant than the momentary pain which, in comparison, seemed “light.”

Suffering can be our friend because God can use it to develop character in those who respond to suffering by trusting Him. This is true even when the suffering is a result of chastening.

“Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby” (Hebrews 12:11).

Suffering can be our friend because it helps us develop empathy for others who are going through the same experiences we have endured.

“Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we

may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God” (II Corinthians 1:3–4).

Suffering can be our friend because it lessens our tendency to pass judgment on others. It helps us avoid the temptation to say, “I told you so” or “If I were you,”

“For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment” (James 2:13).

Suffering can be our friend because it drives us to seek help from others rather than to indulge in a self-sufficient attitude with the notion that we can handle our problems alone. Christianity is meant to be lived in community, not in isolation.

“Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up” (Ecclesiastes 4:9–10).

Suffering can be our friend because it can produce humility when responded to in faith. In the same way that giving opens us up to blessing, humility is the path one travels to gain exaltation. However, if we give to be blessed, we are not giving but investing. We cannot pursue humility to be exalted. That would be almost an oxymoron. Suffering, however, can produce humility, and as a result of that humility, God can truly exalt us.

“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up” (James 4:10).

V. A GOD-HONORING RESPONSE TO SUFFERING

What we have seen is that God is honored when we respond to suffering by glorying in weakness, rejoicing in tribulation, and counting it all joy when we experience various trials. Regardless of the reason for our suffering, whether it is sickness or disease,

disappointment with those we love, persecution for our faith, or God's test of our faith, it is always right to trust God in the midst of our pain.

The Christian life is not about joy versus sorrow, but joy in sorrow. It is not about peace versus turmoil, but peace in the midst of turmoil. It is not about contentment versus need, but contentment in the midst of need. Paul set an example for us.

"Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:11–13).

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

There is something more important than living a pain-free life, and that is being conformed to the character of Christ and embracing eternity's values. (See Romans 8:29.) Although we may acknowledge that suffering can be disciplinary in the sense of leading us to reorient our concepts about spirituality, we tend to want to learn our lesson quickly, put

pain behind us, and get on with life. But there is always another lesson to learn, and the pain will not go away until sin's final sting—death—is conquered in the resurrection.

C. S. Lewis said, "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

For Paul, to suffer was a calling. When sending Ananias to the newly converted Saul, the Lord said, "I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:16). There is at least some sense in which all believers may be called to suffer. As Peter put it, "It is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing" (1 Peter 3:17).

Paul's words in Romans 8:35–39 indicate that believers can expect to face tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword. These are consequences of living as people of faith in a sinful world. Believers in some parts of the world may think it farfetched to say they may experience some of these challenges; but for those in many places today, these experiences are the norm. Whatever we face, we know painful circumstances cannot separate us from God's love. No amount of suffering should be taken to mean God does not love us.

REFLECTIONS

- As you think about your experiences with suffering, can you imagine a way your pain could produce spiritual growth?
- Some people have a higher toleration for pain than others. This is true whether the pain is physical, emotional, or relational. Should you think of responding more quickly in your effort to find the disciplinary benefits of pain rather than simply enduring it as long as possible?
- Whatever your situation with suffering, do you think it is a consequence of your personal sin, a result of bad choices made by someone else, or God's attempt to further develop your faith? If it is none of these, how would you evaluate the reason for your pain?
- Have you already experienced positive results from suffering? What are those results?
- What were the immediate consequences of the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? How have these consequences affected your life?