

A BIBLICAL VIEW OF SUFFERING

PART II

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In Part I of this teaching, we identified the different sources of suffering. In Part II, we are continuing the study of Christian suffering by examining the various purposes of suffering and what we are to do when we find ourselves confronted with suffering.

At the outset, let's start with the question: How Does God Accomplish His Purposes Through Suffering?

God Uses Suffering to Reach the Unbeliever

I once knew a man who resisted the witness of Jesus for over fifty years. One day a doctor told him that he had less than three months to live. The first person he telephoned was the pastor who had been trying to lead him to the Lord for years. He told the pastor, "Come and tell me about Jesus. I'm ready to listen now."

We have all heard testimonies of new Christians who came to the Lord through trauma and suffering. It is very common for unregenerate mankind to turn a deaf ear to the Holy Spirit's call to salvation as long as life is "good." Then we don't need Jesus, we are "self-sufficient." But let suffering enter our lives and suddenly our ears are wide open! God does indeed know how to get our attention, doesn't He?

It is my own belief that when we see suffering in the life of an unbeliever, our overwhelming prayer should be, "Lord, use this suffering to bring that person to you." We should be very slow to pray for relief from the suffering unless and until that person turns to Jesus.

How God Uses Suffering in the Believer

1. Suffering Roots Out Sin

Sometimes we Christians become deeply rooted in sin or in a life style that is destructive to ourselves or others. Often, in such cases, we aren't willing to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit's correction. So He patiently waits for the opportune time to speak, a time when our ears are open and we are ready to listen to His voice. Suffering has a way of opening the ears of the human heart. Our ears are much more sensitive when we find ourselves lying on a bed in pain, unable to meet pending financial obligations, involved in a broken relationship, and so on.

Or perhaps our sin is that we are just luke warm Christians and the Holy Spirit is wanting to pull us closer to Jesus. Is it not logical to assume that He would use suffering as a means of bringing us closer to Himself? I think so. Suffering brings the believer close to Jesus in a way no other aspect of human experience can.

2. Suffering Offers Opportunities to Witness to Others

Look at the Apostle Paul's words regarding his suffering while imprisoned:

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. (Phil 1:12-14 NIV).

It is clear from Paul's statement that he fully accepted his suffering as a means of witnessing to others. I have known of Christians who, in the agony of suffering, would joyfully use their suffering as a means of witnessing to all who came their way...leading many to Christ.

3. Suffering Can Be A Means of Sanctification

Suppose a believer is proud, arrogant, and boastful. Then suppose he or she falls under the humbling power of long, agonizing suffering. Through suffering that person can become a broken, gentle, quiet spirited person who radiates the love of God in such a manner that all clearly see God's love reflected in that previously proud person. Is this not the sanctifying work of God? Does not this kind of change glorify Jesus just as much as the opening of the eyes of the physically blind? Yes, perhaps even more so, because eyes are part of our physical, temporal being while the heart attitude is of our spiritual, eternal being. The glory of a changed heart will shine eternally...physical eyesight lasts only as long as we have a body.

4. Suffering Separates Us from the Flesh

Suffering diminishes the power of the flesh. Suffering accomplishes the work of the cross in our lives by separating the flesh from the spirit. As we learn to truly take up our cross, the power of the flesh decreases while the power of the spirit increases. I believe this is what Peter meant when he wrote,

"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." (I Pet 4:1-2 NIV, emphasis added).

It is clear from what Peter wrote that suffering turns human eyes from the things of this world to the will of God for the life of the sufferer. From all appearances, people who truly suffer seem to be much freer from the carnality of sin when compared to those who haven't suffered. It seems as if they are indeed "done with sin."

I believe that this separation from the flesh and the world is a process. It is not accomplished overnight. The kind of suffering which eliminates sin takes time.

God Gives the Sufferer Earthly and Eternal Rewards

God, in His infinite mercy and goodness, blesses those who suffer in a very special way. These blessings are more in the spiritual realm than they are in the natural. Therefore the blessings that flow from suffering are more lasting and of greater value.

1. God Gives the Sufferer Membership Into A "Special Club"

Part of this blessing is the induction of the sufferer into a special club of those who have suffered for Christ. This club of suffering has some members with big names; names like Joseph, Moses, Jeremiah, Stephen, Paul, Barnabus, Peter, James, John, and of course, Jesus Himself. There are countless others in this club who have suffered down through the centuries. Paul wrote,

"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." (Phil 3:10 NIV emphasis added).

Some time ago I was pondering the meaning of Paul's statement, "sharing in his sufferings." Then several days later I was watching a news event on television. The TV camera captured an emotional reunion of two World War II marines who had fought together and served as prisoners of war together. When these two men saw each other for the first time in over 40 years, they tearfully embraced. The entire scene was charged with emotion, companionship, and camaraderie. An unbreakable bond joined these two men together. This bond was forged in the midst of adversity because of the great suffering that they had shared.

As I was rejoicing and marveling at the power of that scene, the Holy Spirit spoke to me. He told me that that scene was a small example of what it meant to share in Jesus' suffering. When we share in His sufferings

there comes a supernatural bond of fellowship between us and Jesus that cannot be adequately expressed with mere words. When we join the fellowship of His sufferings and joyfully bear it by focusing our eyes on Jesus, we become bonded to Jesus in a very special way. There is another aspect of this bonding through suffering. It occurs when we are bonded to all others who have and are similarly suffering for and in Christ. We are privileged to be co-sufferers with others in the body of Christ. I have observed and experienced a kind of shared suffering with others. I believe this can happen two different ways. First, it can happen as we join our hearts and spirits with those who are suffering. We hurt because they hurt. I believe this kind of bonding is encompassed in Romans 12:15 when Paul tells us we are to "mourn with those who mourn." Another example of this co-suffering is when intercessors pray for some situation or some missionary in a far away land. I have seen and read about such intercessors who suffer in their spirits an agony of union with the one about whom they are in prayer. This agony of union is awesome to behold. The second aspect of co-suffering occurs when we are personally experiencing suffering, be it physical, emotional, etc., and we can relate to others who similarly suffer. Once we experience suffering, we are bonded to co-sufferers in a deep and blessed way.

It should be noted that this bond of co-suffering is completely voluntary on our part. If the Holy Spirit burdens us with another's suffering, we are free to turn from such a burden. Of course, if we do so, we lose the blessing which accompanies such a bonding. It is His will that we bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2) and thereby share in the blessings.

2. The Sufferer Is Blessed by Being Brought Into God's Glory

How does suffering bring one into God's glory? Let's look at Romans, chapter 5:

"...we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." (Rom 5:2-4 NIV).

We see at the end of Paul's discourse that the object of suffering is hope. But I have seen a bumper sticker that says, "I Sure Do Feel Better Now That I've Given Up Hope"

At first glance that statement seems quite unscriptural, doesn't it? But it expresses a real truth when

it is examined more closely. If my hope is rooted in anything other than the glory of God it must be given up! If my hope is in the arm of the flesh, be it my own, a doctor's, a banker's, or any other institution of this world, then my hope is wrongly based. The Bible says, "...we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" and Paul says that the way we get this (real) hope is through suffering!

Moreover, Paul goes on to say:

Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, 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. (Rom 8:17-18 NIV)

Here Paul makes it radiantly clear that sharing in the sufferings of Christ is inseparably coupled with sharing in His glory! I believe Paul so understood this concept that it was the basis of his yearning plea that he may "...know Christ...and the fellowship of his sufferings...." (Phil 3:10). It seems as if Paul's vision reached into eternity. He saw the glory that awaits those who suffer and he wanted to be among them. He wanted to obtain that hope of glory.

Yes, the Scriptural end of suffering is God's hope and His glory. But, in order to grasp this hope and glory, we must have an eternal perspective. Our time on this earth is short while our time with the Lord in eternity is without end! That's what Paul meant when he said, "...that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us"! (Rom 8:18 NIV).

WHAT ARE WE TO DO IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING?

In light of all of the above, are we to simply blindly tell the poor soul who is suffering to just "tough it out"? Or are we to lie down with a fatalistic view and passively accept whatever comes along as "the will of God"? Let's see how God's Word answers these questions.

1. James' Counsel

James wrote,

"Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray....Is any one of you sick [suffering]? He should call the elders of the church and pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and

pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." (Jas 5:13- 16 NIV, emphasis added).

I believe that this Scripture is often misapplied. In many instances James' instructions have been reduced to a ritual in which the official elders of a church ceremonially anoint a sick person with little or no thought or prayer. I don't believe that's what James intended. The reason for naming "elders" as those who should pray is that presumably those "elders" are the spiritually mature members of the body. They know God's voice. They have a life style of prayer and can hear when the Holy Spirit speaks God's truth regarding a sufferer. I believe that we should broaden James' term "elder" to include all who are mature in Christ and who know how to hear the Lord's voice. As they pray for and with the sufferer they can speak with clarity regarding God's will in the matter. If the cause of the suffering is sin, the elders should confront the person in love about the sin. If the cause is Satan, the elders will confront Satan and stand with the sufferer against the enemy's attack. If the cause is a disease or ailment of the body, the elders can pray for God's healing touch, encourage medical help, and can simply give comfort and encouragement.

As a proper example of an elder praying for the sick, I once heard Judson Cornwall tell about a time when the Holy Spirit forbade him to anoint a sick woman with oil or to pray for her healing. Some days later, when she was near death, she finally confessed gross sin. After her confession and forgiveness she fully recovered. I suspect that Cornwall's unusual refusal to pray for her healing played a large part in her repentance.

2. Stand With the Sufferer

Once proper prayer has been raised, and it is collectively determined that God's hand is indeed in the situation, we must stand with the sufferer. We are to beseech God for His relief, His grace and His mercy. Remember, Scripture tells us to "...mourn with those who mourn." (Rom 12:15 NIV). But, if we determine that God's hand is not in the situation, we are to resist the suffering with every fibre of our being! We are to stand against the situation and exercise our authority over principalities, powers and the satanic kingdom with and on behalf of the sufferer.

Note here again that I am not suggesting it is always all one way or another. Very often an illness has a natural, physiological cause, but Satan comes in and uses the circumstances to try to defeat us. Again, with the wisdom of the godly, we need to sort out what is really happening. Then we can stand against what needs

to be fought off while still extending a loving hand of support.

3. Peter's Counsel

Finally, let's look at Peter's counsel in this matter, "So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good." (I Pet 4:19 NIV emphasis added). Here Peter is telling us that if our suffering is indeed God's will, there isn't much we can do about it! If this is the case, he says we are to do two things: 1) commit ourselves to God, and 2) continue to do good. That describes one who says, "God, this hurts. I know you know how much I hurt. But God, it seems that for now this is what your will is for me. I accept this as from you for you are a God of love. You always have my best interest at heart. And Lord, I'm going to continue to tell everyone I see about your love, your mercy, your goodness and your faithfulness. Most of all, Lord, I'm going to tell others about how you died to redeem us from sin. Finally, Lord, as long as I have strength, I'm going to be praising you!"

CONCLUSION

In all my years as a believer, I have heard only a few sermons on the subject of suffering. Yet, I've heard dozens of messages on healing and deliverance from suffering. Yes, God does heal and deliver. That is an unequivocal, biblical fact. But there are also answers for those who aren't healed or delivered on our timetables. The Lord wants those who have and are suffering to be comforted with His comfort. The Lord wants them to be given new hope, a hope based on God's Word anchored in His everlasting glory.

Heavenly Father, I pray that you open the hearts of those who are now suffering. Open hearts to receive your tender love. Pour your all-sufficient grace into the deep crevices of each heart - the crevices made by the hurts of deep suffering. Lord, help us not only to understand, but to embrace your gentle, loving hand. Give us a vision of the glory you have waiting for those who suffer. Lift our feet to the golden splendor of the streets above and let us see your eternal purpose and your smiling face as you say, "Well done! Good and faithful servant!"

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