

A Look at Suffering

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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.”*

I want to talk about troubles, suffering, and hurting. It is not a popular topic; it is not all that uplifting, yet it is unavoidable. Many Christians believe that we can use our giving to God as leverage for a pain-free life. So our approach to God is one of manipulation: if we pray enough, give enough money to the church, serve others enough, love our neighbors enough, and have sufficient faith, then we can avoid suffering.

As a result of this thinking many folks think that if we are suffering in any way then we are substandard Children of God; we are lacking, or are weak, or ungiving in some way. We therefore compound our suffering with guilt and we become a blubbering blathering mess.

But to have a life without suffering is unbiblical, just as it is contrary to human experience. We all suffer at times, or we know someone who has suffered, which makes us suffer vicariously. When a loved one is going through difficult times, we feel their pain; we feel their suffering. We all hurt at times, but we don't have to live in suffering. 1 Peter 5:10 teaches us this: *In his*

kindness God called you to share in his eternal glory by means of Christ Jesus. So after you have suffered a little while, he will restore, support, and strengthen you, and he will place you on a firm foundation.

Suffering is not a permanent state, unless we choose that. What does suffering even refer to in the Bible? It has many words that describe some aspect of suffering. Generally, it means to endure hardship, hurts, affliction, troubles, and tribulation. It means to endure, hold on, persevere through the feelings of loss and pain.

So, when we are suffering, we are enduring and carrying on. Peter had much to share about suffering. In 1 Peter 1:6 he tells us, *“In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials you will receive praise and glory and honor on the Day when Jesus Christ is revealed.”* So part of the reason we suffer is to develop greater faith.

He goes on to say: “Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable (charis – grace) if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.” “But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God... If you

suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.”

Apparently there are different grades of suffering. There is the high-quality suffering, which comes from unjust and unearned tribulation. We haven't really done anything to bring it on. It's just that accidents happen, circumstances beyond our control arise, and people are just plain mean, and we got some of their orneriness on us. Then there is that low-quality suffering, which comes from our ego-laced stupidity. To endure unjust hardship while being conscious of God is a blessing. But to suffer because of our bad judgment and actions is pretty much wasted suffering, of no spiritual benefit, except what we learn over a protracted period of time through tragic trial and error. Eventually, we may learn our lessons, but not all suffering is the same; not all is directly beneficial or instructive.

Everybody hurts sometimes; it is a normal part of our human experience. Again, Peter shares: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.” (1 Peter 4:12). It is not unusual to go through challenges and endure hardships – in other words, to suffer. We suffer a while, then we are strengthened.

There are other benefits to suffering, says Peter. In 1 Peter 4:4 we are told: *If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.*” Suffering can make us aware of the Presence of God within us. We are blessed as we suffer yet hold dear to the love, peace, and joy of Christ.

So how do we best persevere through our challenges? Here are a few ideas. One, focus on God. We can remember that throughout our entire life, the good times and bad times, the sufferings and the exaltations, our purpose is to serve God and express Christ in all we do, say, think, feel, and believe. Our purpose is to learn to take the high-road in all circumstances and see all people as fellow Children of God. Our suffering can help focus our minds and hearts on the One Source in our lives.

Are we suffering needlessly from things we are bringing on ourselves? Everyone clutches something. Are we hanging on to anger or resentment instead of hope and trust? Are we holding close to us memories of hurts and affronts instead of thoughts of forgiveness, love, and tolerance? What we cling to can cause us discomfort or peace; pain or healing. Where is our focus; what are we holding in our hearts and minds?

Two, we can know that we are not captives of our circumstances, other people, or the world. Rather, we are free in Spirit. Nothing can disturb the calm peace of our souls without our permission. We are co-creators with God in the making of our lives. We can learn from and use our suffering. Hellen Keller said: “Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved.”

Three, do good. Keep doing the good of our hearts, minds, and visions planted there by Christ. 1 Peter 4:19 tells us, “...those who suffer according to God’s Will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.” We can persevere, stay

the course, be faithful regardless of the difficulties. When we stumble, we can get up with the help of God. When we suffer, we can endure through the help and strength of God. Some of us will only fulfill our purpose on earth because of the strength, experience, and wisdom acquired through our pain and suffering. Galatians 6:9 tells us: *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*

Four, trust God in all things. We don't have to take things into our own hands. We can turn within and wait for God to nudge us in what to do and say. Proverbs 3:5-6 teaches: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.*

Five, endure without complaining, whining, or judging. The Bible tells us to "Do all things without grumbling or complaining," (Philippians 2:14), and that would include suffering. Everyone suffers at some level. It is a mistake to assume otherwise.

Everyone has their own challenges, their unique lessons. Everybody hurts sometimes; everybody cries. When we can get our minds off our own suffering then we can extend a hand to others in need. The example of how we manage our own suffering can profoundly affect people. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross wrote: "The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of those depths."

As we suffer, we are in good company. Jesus suffered, as did David, Daniel Joseph, Job, and many other characters in the Bible. Our troubles are not uncommon, but they are unique to us. We

don't have to complain and languish. With some people, you will never know what they are experiencing unless they call on you for help. There is a song that expressed this sentiment. (Sing: Nobody Know the Troubles I've Seen).

This leads in to step six, reach out to the people in our life for help and comfort. God put family and friends in our life for a reason: to love and be loved by. Be willing to be loved and helped. We are not alone in our struggles. We are not in this world alone unless we choose that path. There are plenty of resources surrounding us if we will release the thought that we must do it our self.

Seven, reach out to God. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus assures his followers, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." We can gratefully accept that comfort for our self today. Isaiah 49:13 -- *Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth ... For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.* We just need to change our focus from our trials to God.

And eight, live by what is suggested in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 -- Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Although suffering is inevitable, it is my prayer that it passes quickly, and we gain the support and restoration promised by God. I pray that we can release any thoughts that attract more than our fair share of dis-ease into our lives, minds, and bodies. I pray that we will turn to Christ for the answers, the strength, and the wisdom

to endure our trials with a calm loving spirit and realize that we are not alone.

Let us pray....