

# Lessons to Learn From Suffering

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M.W. Bassford  
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## Introduction.

- A. In the world in which we live, suffering is a human constant. It is inevitable that at some point in our lives, we will have to endure pain. This truth does not change for us simply because we are Christians. A lot of the TV preachers will tell you differently. They will tell you that with enough faith (and enough money sent to them), that Christians will never have to deal with sickness, poverty, or any of the other afflictions that bedevil the rest of the world. This is not true. A quick study of the life of the poverty-stricken, persecuted apostle Paul, for one, is enough to tell us that even the best Christians sometimes have to go through hard times.
- B. These hard times come into our lives for a number of reasons. Sometimes, we bring them on ourselves through disregard of God's law. Other times, some evil person inflicts suffering on us. Still other times, suffering arises in our lives because the devil is hard at work and the world is not intended to be perfect.
- C. Except for the times when we bring judgment on ourselves, God is not the cause of human suffering. However, even though He doesn't cause it, He still allows it to go on, and this problem has vexed moral philosophers for centuries. They ask, "If God is entirely good, and if God can do whatever He wants to, why doesn't he keep bad things from happening to good people?" The answer to this is simple: God's goodness and power are directed toward the spiritual well-being of mankind, not its physical well-being. Certainly, God has nothing against us being happy here, but His primary concern in our lives is getting us to heaven. Sometimes, this makes it necessary that we suffer. Just as a doctor must sometimes cause his patients pain to restore them to physical health, so sometimes God allows suffering in our lives to restore us to spiritual health. However, just as a doctor's treatments come to nothing if the patient refuses to follow his instructions, so too the suffering that God allows in our lives is pointless if we don't consider it. So that we don't miss His instruction when it comes, let's look now at what the Bible has to say about lessons to learn from suffering.

## I. Reliance on God.

- A. The first lesson that suffering teaches us is reliance on God. One of the biggest delusions that human beings suffer from is the delusion that we can do it all by ourselves. This is exactly what happened to the apostle Paul. While still on earth, he received an amazing blessing: a vision of heaven. However, this vision had its price. Lest Paul become arrogant because of what he had seen, he was given a thorn in the flesh. We see his reaction to this thorn in 2 Corinthians 12:8-9. He asked God to take it away. God said no. Imagine—the apostle Paul himself, a man who worked countless miracles of healing, was going to spend the rest of his life in need of healing he wouldn't get! Why? In his weakness, God's power was perfected. God could only take Paul where Paul needed to be when he was reminded by this thorn not to trust in himself, but to trust in God.
- B. Sometimes, we need to learn reliance on God the same way that Paul did. A lot of the time, we only believe that we need help when we see that we need help. Sometimes, we only get there through suffering.
- C. I can't think about this without thinking about the spiritual journey of a good friend of mine, an elder down in Texas named Pat. Pat's always been a good guy: a good husband, a good father to his kids, a good worker in the church, but Pat himself will tell you that he wasn't giving everything to God the way he should have been. But then the unthinkable happened: this healthy, athletic man in his forties was diagnosed with prostate cancer, and the cancer had already spread to other parts of his body. When they first spotted the problem, the doctors gave Pat a year to live, and he had to come to terms with the fact that although he had been expecting to live for decades, he might not even live to see his daughter graduate college.
- D. That cancer was a wakeup call for Pat. He started thinking about the way he'd been living, and he realized he needed to do a better job. He realized that there were many things he should have been doing as a shepherd, as a servant, as a leader in the church, that he just hadn't been. And so he started living for God like he had one year left to live. He took the lead in stirring the congregation up to live for God. He took the lead in looking for ways to transform the church into what God wanted it to be. He even took the lead in encouraging the other elders to do their jobs better. Now, I can't tell you how the story ends. Last I heard, the doctors said Pat had ten years left to live, not one, and he's doing fine. But I can tell you that the Pat I knew, the phenomenal leader in the church who worked for God and relied on God, was brought there through suffering.

## II. Patience.

- A. In addition to producing reliance on God, suffering can also produce patience in our lives. This is the point that James makes in James 1:2-4. A lot of the time, we get stuck in an instant-gratification mentality. We want what we want, and we want it now, and that's true both of the things we put on the credit card and of the things we want from God. When we are tested, we realize that things aren't that easy. As we continue to trust in God and wait for His promises, we develop endurance and mature as Christians.

- B. It's like this: back when my brother was still in the Army, he went through special-forces training. As part of the training, they put him out in the middle of the woods for six weeks to do a bunch of tasks, but they didn't give him any food. He had to live for six weeks on what he could scavenge with his bare hands, which basically meant bark, weeds, and some minnows. Now, the Army didn't do that to him because they were mean. They did that to him to train him, so that when he was in the middle of a war in terrible conditions, that he could keep going because he had already learned to deal with hardship. God does the same thing. He uses hard times to train us to keep going in our service to Him. He teaches us patience through suffering.

### **III. Perspective.**

- A. We can also learn perspective from our suffering. Paul explains in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. When Paul preached the gospel throughout the Roman Empire, his life wasn't easy. Later in 2 Corinthians, he gives us a list of trials so hair-raising that any one of them would be trial enough for one of us for a lifetime. Things were so bad that he describes his outward man as perishing. Because of his suffering, earthly life didn't offer him much.
- B. However, that earthly trial caused him to focus his life on his heavenly reward. It made him recognize what was really important. He thought about the promises of God, and he realized that next to what he would have in heaven, all of those miserable things he was going through were just momentary, light affliction. They were nothing when compared to the eternal weight of glory that was stored up for him. Our trials can have the same effect on us. They can make us realize just how futile and transitory earth is in comparison with the glories of heaven, and we can only live wisely when we live with that truth in mind.

### **IV. Comfort for Others.**

- A. Suffering can also be valuable in our lives because it teaches us comfort for others who are suffering. Consider Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 1:3-5. As we've already seen, Paul's life as a preacher was filled with hardship, but through all of that hardship, he was comforted by God. What's interesting, though, is Paul's explanation for why God comforted him. It wasn't just because God wanted to make Paul feel better. It was so that Paul would be able to comfort others with the comfort he had received from God. Paul knew what it was to suffer, and he knew what it was to be comforted. As a result, whenever he encountered another Christian who was suffering, he could point them to the divine consolation that he himself had received.
- B. This is something that all of us can learn from our suffering. As long as we remain faithful to God, we know that the suffering we encounter cannot destroy us. God will always be there for us, and He will always get us through our troubles. Once we experience that in our lives, we can use our experiences to encourage others.
- C. Let me give you an example. In this congregation, there are a number of widows, and anytime a woman loses her husband, it is an occasion for tremendous pain. However, the widows here have all trusted in God throughout their suffering, and God has gotten them through it. However, this suffering hasn't just brought these widows closer to God. It's given them an experience they can use to help others. If some other woman here were to lose her husband, the widows here can help that new widow out in a way that I never could because they understand both the depth of the suffering involved, and the greatness of the comfort provided by God. They can say, "God will get you through this," and they can say it with authority because God has gotten THEM through it. This is generally true. In suffering we learn comfort for others.

### **V. Understanding of Jesus.**

- A. In addition to providing us with comfort for others, suffering also gives us a better understanding of Jesus. This is the point that Peter makes in 1 Peter 2:20-21. One of the things that we often overlook about Jesus is the significance of suffering in His life. He was rejected by His family, hated by the people of His hometown, driven to spend the years of His ministry as a homeless wanderer, and ultimately killed by His own people. By the world's standards, His life was a failure. It really makes us ask ourselves, "How could He do that?" How were His priorities so different that He was willing to endure years of hostility without tangible reward?
- B. When we ourselves suffer as Christians, Jesus starts to make more sense. We learn why He was willing to undergo suffering when we undergo suffering ourselves. We start to see the world more as He saw it. We start to see that the things that we think are important, but that He didn't think were important, really aren't. We understand why He lived the life that He did, and it inspires us to do the same ourselves.

### **VI. God's Mercy.**

- A. Last of all, suffering teaches us an important lesson about God's mercy. Look with me at James 5:11. Sure, suffering isn't any fun, but in the life of the Christian, suffering is never without purpose, and sooner or later we will see that purpose. We will see that God doesn't allow us to suffer because He's mean. He does it because the opposite is true. He does it because He is compassionate and merciful, and even if we don't see how, the things that happen in our lives will turn out for good.
- B. Indeed, the mercy of God is the predominant feature of all of our lives. We exist only because of His mercy, we are blessed on earth because of His mercy, and we have the opportunity to live with Him forever because of His mercy. If you are not serving Him faithfully now, He still offers His mercy even to you. Claim it now.