

Suffering Well

Philippians 4:10—*“that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death....”*

When people come to me for counseling they are usually suffering for some reason. Some are suffering because of their own sin (like a sexual addiction), dealing with the consequences of their sin (as in broken relationships), or feeling the impact of how someone has sinned against them (like the devastating impact of abuse in their lives). Some people are suffering for righteousness’ sake and are being persecuted for their faith and Godly lifestyle. Others are struggling with anxiety and depression caused by major losses they have felt in their life. These losses include a failing marriage, seeing adult children reject serving Christ, and children who are not following after God’s best for their lives. Some have lost a job or have suffered financial losses. There are many painful realities that we experience in life. It is in these times of suffering that our faith in God is tested.

Suffering defined: The Greek word means *“to be affected in our experience by something that has happened to us.”* In Webster’s 1828 dictionary, suffering is defined as *“the bearing of pain, inconvenience or loss; pain endured; distress, loss or injury incurred; as sufferings by pain or sorrow; sufferings by want or by wrongs.”*

- **Our suffering identifies us with Christ.**

Philippians 3:10-11—*“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.”*

- **Sharing suffering with another believer identifies us with the Body of Christ.**

2 Corinthians 1:4-7—*“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. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.”*

- **Suffering helps us to overcome sin and grow in Christian character.**

Romans 5:3-5—*“Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that 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.”*

Beware of Spiritual Attacks during Times of Suffering

1 Peter 5:6-10—*“Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. 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.”*

Understand Satan’s goals

- Satan has already lost the battle in blinding your eyes to the gospel. Now his goal is to keep the world (wife, children, friends, others) from feeling the impact of Christ working in your life.
- Satan wants us to misinterpret suffering, trials and tests.
 - The children of Israel had the wrong interpretation. *“Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.” (Numbers 14:1-4)*
 - Joseph had the right interpretation. *“But Joseph said to them, ‘Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.’ Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.” (Genesis 50:19-21)*
- Satan wants you to condemn yourself, become bitter, and blame God.
- Satan wants you to look to wrong sources to find solace and comfort for the pain.

Guard against a victim mentality (Read Numbers 14:1-12)

- Complaining (v. 1-2)
- Questioning God—asking “Why?” without wanting an answer from Him (v. 3)
- Negative thinking (v. 3)
- Self-will (v. 3-4)
- Rebellion (v. 4)
- Curse (v. 12)

The Painful Realities of Suffering in this Life

Romans 8:18—*“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.*”



Understanding the Difference between our Heart and Emotions

Heart

- The heart knows and wrestles with realities. (*My daughter got into a car accident tonight—how do I feel about that?*)
- The heart lives and deals in the realities of living and dying, loving and hating. Paul says in Romans 9:1-3, *“I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit— that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.”*

Emotions

- The heart is the source of our emotions. But equating our heart with emotion is the same nonsense as saying that love is a feeling.
- Emotions are the voice of the heart, but they are not the heart.
- Emotions express the deeper movements of the heart (like when we weep for a lost loved one or cheer as our child scores a goal in a soccer game).
- 2 Corinthians 2:4—*“For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.”*

Our mind stands detached while with the heart we experience and respond to life and all its fullness. As we experience genuine losses in our life, we will naturally go through the grief cycle. Failing to work through the grief cycle causes most people to get stuck in depression.

How to Respond to Suffering

Everyone will face seasons of suffering, Christians and non-Christians alike. Sometimes the season of suffering is very long, possibly until the day God takes us home to be with Himself. Suffering may include the loss of a loved one, illness, divorce, disillusionment, temptation, or the consequences of sin—to name a few. The difference comes in how a Christian chooses to deal with life's difficulties. Many believers spend their lives protecting themselves and avoiding discomforts. Unknowingly, they may be rejecting a means by which God wants to strengthen their life message to others through providing victory over personal suffering. They may be unaware of God's instructions for dealing with trials, or they may choose to deal with the situation in their own strength apart from God.

Whatever the cause, mishandling life's trials can produce bitterness, pride, disillusionment, and fear—rather than the faith, character, strength, and endurance that God wants to provide. Some practical suggestions for dealing with your suffering are listed here:

1. Remember that God is in control of everything. He is Sovereign.

Everything that happens in my life and in this world is under the umbrella of God's sovereignty. There is nothing in my life that He does not know about or did not know would happen. God is omnipotent and all-knowing; nothing takes Him by surprise. Although Job suffered terrible losses in his life, God had a hedge about Job limiting the destruction. He purposed to draw Job into a deeper understanding of who He was. Through his suffering, Job learned that focusing on God produces an enduring faith. (*Job 1:10, 20-22; 42:5*) In God's timing Job emerged victorious.

Likewise, God has promised that every event in our lives will work for our good to transform us into the likeness of His Son. (*Romans 8:28-29*) We are enabled to understand and comfort others by receiving God's loving comfort and grace during our own sufferings (*2 Corinthians 1:3-5*). We can pray, "*I trust in thee, O Lord—Thou art my God—my times are in thy hand.*" (*Psalms 31:14-15*) Our lives are made fruitful by the pruning shears of a loving Father. (*John 15:2*)

2. Focus on the person and presence of the Lord Jesus.

Faith is trusting in the person of Jesus Christ and His Holy Word. (*Hebrews 11:6, 13:5-6*) Do not focus your attention (and emotions) on yourself and yours, the circumstance, or the offender. If we focus on the offender or circumstance, it will emotionally dictate and control our lives. Instead, immerse yourself in Scripture and make prayer a priority. Paul charged Timothy, "*But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned.....the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.*" (*2 Timothy 3:14-15*) Be honest with God about your pain, but surrender

your desires and choose to trust Him — whatever the answer may be. Pray for acceptance, strength, and the desire to seek God’s will in all things. Look to Christ and love Him with all your heart, mind, and soul. True faith in God brings contentment in every circumstance. (*Philippians 4:11-13*)

3. Commit the situation to God.

We must put our trust in God and accept that He is sovereign regardless of what we think or feel. If you do not believe in the sovereignty of God, you will drive yourself crazy with questions like, “*I could have...I should have...Maybe if I ...*” God is in charge of the situation and will work for our good when we trust Him. (Romans 8:28) When calamity comes, we must commit the situation to Him. If someone hurts us deeply, He knows and loves us, and we must turn the hurtful situation over to Him.

4. Forgive all offenders from the heart.

Forgiveness is not a feeling; it is an act of the will. Few “feel” like forgiving when they are hurt by others. We must forgive (*Matthew 18:34-35; Hebrews 12:15*) in order to keep our focus on the Lord, receive His ongoing power and provision, and avoid spiritual torment. Forgiveness is not letting the offender off the hook, but it is releasing him to God’s hook. It is trusting God to deal with that person in His wise and just way as only He can do. In forgiving our offender we deny Satan a foothold in our lives.

5. Ask God to forgive you when you have failed.

Sometimes we may suffer because we have made bad choices in following our own wisdom and sinful will. When personal failures occur, ask for and accept God’s forgiveness. (1 John 1:9) Continued thoughts of “what if” and “if only” will bring unnecessary torment. God is faithful and He forgives sin. Do not despise God’s discipline in the continuing consequences of your sin. Rather allow them to deepen your humility and dependency on Jesus Christ.

6. Find God’s clear direction and obey it.

You have a choice to make. You can resist the circumstances and question God’s wisdom (a victim mentality), or you can pour yourself into Bible study, prayer, and faithfully obeying Him. God will clearly give us His direction through the Holy Spirit and His Word when we choose to listen and obey. We must let God take control, looking diligently for His will. This may include more suffering (Luke 9:23), but God extends His grace and peace to His faithful during their trials and suffering. (2 Corinthians 12:9-10) The question is not, “*How long will this last?*” but rather, “*How do I choose to respond?*”

Grief Cycle

Shock

This is not happening to me!



Denial

This did not happen to me!



Anger

Why did this happen to me?



Bargaining

How could I have changed what happened to me?



Depression

I can't change what happened to me.



Acceptance

I will allow myself to grieve the loss and feel the pain from what happened to me.



Rebuilding Life

I will put my hope and trust in God for whatever will happen to me.



New Wholeness

God will use what happened to me.

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