

The Doctrine of Suffering

Introduction

Why me? Why now? What is God doing? Suffering is a tool God uses to get our attention and to accomplish His purposes in our lives. It is designed to build our trust in the Almighty, but suffering requires the right response if it is to be successful in accomplishing God's purposes. Suffering forces us to turn from trust in our own resources to living by faith in God's resources.

Suffering is not in itself virtuous, nor is it a sign of holiness. It is also not a means of gaining points with God, nor of subduing the flesh (as in asceticism). When possible, suffering is to be avoided. Christ avoided suffering unless it meant acting in disobedience to the Father's will.

Ecclesiastes 7:14 In the day of prosperity be happy, But in the day of adversity consider--God has made the one as well as the other so that man may not discover anything *that will be* after him.

The following questions are designed to help us "consider" in the day of adversity:

- (1) How am I responding to it?
- (2) How should I respond to it?
- (3) Am I learning from it?
- (4) Does my response demonstrate faith, love for God and for others, Christ-like character, values, commitment, priorities, etc.?
- (5) How can God use it in my life?

Suffering Defined

What is suffering? What are these bends in the road that God puts in the path of life that we are to carefully consider? Simply stated, suffering is anything which hurts or irritates. In the design of God, it is also something to make us think. It is a tool God uses to get our attention and to accomplish His purposes in our lives in a way that would never occur without the trial or irritation.

Illustrations of Suffering

"It may be cancer or a sore throat. It may be the illness or loss of someone close to you. It may be a personal failure or disappointment in your job or school work. It may be a rumor that is circulating in your office or your church, damaging your reputation, bringing you grief and anxiety."¹ It can be anything that ranges from something as small and irritating as the bite of a mosquito or the nagging of a gnat to the charge of an elephant or having to face a lion in the lions' den as with Daniel (Dan. 6).

General Causes of Suffering

- (1) We suffer because we live in a fallen world where sin reigns in the hearts of men.
- (2) We suffer because of our own foolishness. We reap what we sow (Gal. 6:7-9).
- (3) We sometimes suffer because it is God's discipline. "For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son He receives." (Heb. 12:6).

¹ Ron Lee Davis with James Lee Denney, *Gold in the Making*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1983, p. 17-18.

(4) We may suffer persecution because of our faith--especially when we take a stand on biblical issues, i.e., suffering for righteousness sake (2 Tim. 3:12).

Of course, all of these do not apply at the same time. All suffering is not, for instance, a product of our own foolishness, self-induced misery, or sin. It is true, however, that rarely does suffering not reveal areas of need, weaknesses, and wrong attitudes that need to be removed like dross in the gold refining process (cf. 1 Pet. 1:6-7).

The Nature of Suffering

Suffering is Painful

Suffering is hard. It is never easy. Regardless of what we know and how hard we apply the principles, it is going to hurt (cf. 1 Pet. 1:6--“distressed” is *lupeo* meaning “to cause pain, sorrow, grief”).

Suffering is Perplexing

Suffering is somewhat mysterious. We may know some of the theological reasons for suffering from Scripture, yet when it hits, there is still a certain mystery. Why now? What is God doing? In this, it is designed to build our trust in the Almighty.

Suffering is Purposeful

Suffering is not without meaning in spite of its mystery. It has as its chief purpose the formation of Christ-like character (Rom. 8:28-29).

Suffering Proves, Tests Us

“Trials” in James 1:2 is the Greek *peirasmos* and refers to that which examines, tests, and proves the character or integrity of something. “Testing” in this same verse is *dokimion* which has a similar idea. It refers to a test designed to prove or approve. Suffering is that which proves one’s character and integrity along with both the object and quality of one’s faith. Compare 1 Pet. 1:6-7 where the same Greek words are used along with the verb *dokimazo* which means, “put to the test,” “prove by testing as with gold.”

Suffering is a Process

“We know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, proven character; and . . .” (Rom. 5:3-4). “Knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect (mature) and complete, lacking in nothing” (Jam. 1:3-4). As a process, it takes time. The results God seeks to accomplish with the trials of life requires time and thus also, endurance.

Suffering is a Purifier

No matter the reason, even if it is not God’s discipline for blatant carnality, it is a purifier for none of us will ever be perfect in this life (Phil. 3:12-14).

Suffering Provides Opportunity

Suffering provides opportunity for God’s glory, our transformation, testimony, and ministry, etc. (See reasons for suffering given below.)

Suffering Requires Our Cooperation

Suffering requires the right response if it is to be successful in accomplishing God's purposes. "We all want the product, character; but we don't want the process, suffering."² Because of our make up as human beings, we can't have one without the other.

Suffering is Predetermined and Inevitable

1 Thessalonians 3:3 so that no man may be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this.

1 Peter 4:19 Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.

The question we must each face is not, "if" we are going to have trials in life, but how will we respond to them.

Suffering is a Struggle

It's going to be a battle all the way. That's why they are called "trials" and "testings." Even when we understand the purposes and principles of suffering, and we know the promises of God's love and concern given in the Word of God for handling suffering, dealing with the trials of life is never easy because suffering hurts. Trials simply give us the capacity to cooperate with the process (Jam. 1:4). They allow the process to work and allow us to experience inner peace and joy in the midst of the trials.

In order to handle suffering with inner joy and tranquillity, we must be able to look ahead to God's purposes and reasons for suffering. This requires faith in the eternal verities of God.

Compare the blessings of affliction as seen in the testimony of the Psalmist in Ps. 119:

Before affliction:	Straying and ignoring (vs. 67a)
During and in affliction:	Learning and turning (vs. 71, cf. vs. 59)
When under affliction we need to:	Determine Causes if we can (Is it because of something I have done?) Determine Objectives (What is God wanting to do in my life or in others?) Determine Solutions (How does God want me to handle this?)
After affliction:	Knowing and changing (vss. 67b, 97-102) Resting and valuing (vss. 65,72)

We must understand God's chief purpose for our lives is to be conformed to the image of Christ and He has determined in His plan to use suffering for our spiritual development. If we are going to endure suffering and the trials of life, however, we must also understand and believe in the other purposes and reasons for suffering as they are related to the chief purpose.

² Davis and Denney, pp. 19 and 32.

Purposes and Reasons for Suffering

(1) **We suffer as a testimony, as a witness** (2 Tim 2:8-10; 2 Cor. 4:12-13; 1 Pet. 3:13-17). When believers handle suffering joyfully and with stability, it becomes a marvelous testimony to the power and life of Christ that we claim and name. Suffering provides key opportunities to manifest and magnify the power of God through His servants in order to verify and confirm the messenger and his message. It provides opportunities to reveal our credentials as ambassadors of Christ (1 Kings. 17:17-24; John 11:1-45). This includes the following areas:

- To glorify God before the angelic world (Job 1-2; 1 Pet. 4:16).
- To manifest the power of God to others (2 Cor. 12:9, 10; John 9:3).
- To manifest the character of Christ in the midst of suffering as a testimony to win others to Christ (2 Cor. 4:8-12; 1 Pet. 3:14-17).

(2) **We suffer to develop our capacity and sympathy in comforting others** (2 Cor. 1:3-5)

(3) **We suffer to keep down pride** (2 Cor. 12:7). The Apostle Paul saw his thorn in the flesh as an instrument allowed by God to help him maintain a spirit of humility and dependence on the Lord because of the special revelations he had seen as one who had been caught up to the third heaven.

(4) **We suffer because it is a training tool.** God lovingly and faithfully uses suffering to develop personal righteousness, maturity, and our walk with Him (Heb. 12:5f; 1 Pet. 1:6; Jam. 1:2-4). In this sense, suffering is designed:

- **As discipline for sin** to bring us back to fellowship through genuine confession (Ps. 32:3-5; 119:67).
- **As a pruning tool** to remove dead wood from our lives (weaknesses, sins of ignorance, immature attitudes and values, etc.). The desired goal is increased fruitfulness (John 15:1-7). Trials may become mirrors of reproof to reveal hidden areas of sin and weakness (Ps. 16:7; 119:67, 71).
- **As a tool for growth** designed to cause us to rely on the Lord and His Word. Trials test our faith and cause us to use the promises and principles of the Word (Ps. 119:71, 92; 1 Pet. 1:6; Jam. 1:2-4; Ps. 4:1 [The Hebrew of this passage can mean, "You have enlarged, made me grow wide by my distress]). Suffering or trials teach us the truth of Psalm 62:1-8, the truth of learning to "wait on the Lord *only*."
- **As a means of learning what obedience really means.** It becomes a test of our loyalty (Heb. 5:8). Illustration: If a father tells his son to do something he likes to do (i.e., eat a bowl of ice cream) and he does it, the child has obeyed, but he hasn't really learned anything about obedience. If his dad, however, asks him to mow the lawn, that becomes a test and teaches something about the meaning of obedience. The point is, obedience often costs us something and is hard. It can require sacrifice, courage, discipline, and faith in the belief that God is good and has our best interests at heart regardless of how things might appear to us. Regardless of the reason God allows suffering into our lives, rarely does it not reveal areas of need, weaknesses, wrong attitudes, etc., as it did in Job.

Suffering itself is not the thing that produces faith or maturity. It is only a tool that God uses to bring us to Himself so we will respond to Him and His Word. It forces us to turn from trust in our own resources to living by faith in God's resources.

- It causes us to put first things first. Ultimately, it is the Word and the Spirit of God that produces faith and mature Christ-like character (Ps. 119:67, 71).

In James 1:2-4 and 1 Peter 1:6-7 the key word is “proof.” “Proof” is the word *dokimion* which looks at both the concept of testing which purifies, and the results, the proof that is left after the test. The Lord uses trials to test our faith in the sense of purifying it, to bring it to the surface, so we are forced to put our faith to work.

(5) We suffer to bring about continued dependence on the grace and power of God. Suffering is designed to cause us to walk by God’s ability, power and provision rather than by our own (2 Cor. 11:24-32; 12:7-10; Eph. 6:10f; Ex. 17:8f). It causes us to turn from our resources to His resources.

(6) We suffer to manifest the life and character of Christ (The Fruit of the Spirit) (2 Cor.4:8-11; Phil. 1:19f). This is similar to point (4) above with more emphasis on the process and defining the objective, the production of the character of Christ. This has both a negative and a positive aspect:

- **Negative:** Suffering helps to remove impurities from our lives such as indifference, self trust, false motives, self-centeredness, wrong values and priorities, and human defense and escape mechanisms by which we seek to handle our problems (man-made solutions). Suffering in itself does not remove the impurities, but is a tool God uses to cause us to exercise faith in the provisions of God’s grace. It is God’s grace in Christ (our new identity in Christ, the Word and the Holy Spirit) that changes us. This negative aspect is accomplished in two ways:

(a) **When out of fellowship with the Lord:** Suffering becomes discipline from our heavenly Father (Heb. 5:5-11; 1 Cor. 11:28-32; 5:1-5). This involves **known sin**, rebellion and indifference to God.

(b) **When in fellowship with the Lord:** Suffering becomes the loving and skillful handy work of the Vine Dresser to make us more productive. It involves *unknown sin*, areas we may not be aware of, but that are nevertheless hindering our growth and fruitfulness. In this case, suffering often constitutes mirrors of reproof (John 15:1-7).

- **Positive:** When believers live under suffering joyfully (i.e., they endure and keep on applying the promises and principles of the faith), Christ’s life or character will be more and more manifested as they grow through the suffering (2 Cor. 4:9-10; 3:18). This means trust, peace, joy, stability, biblical values, faithfulness and obedience in contrast to sinful mental attitudes, blaming, running, complaining, and reactions against God and people.

(7) We suffer to manifest the evil nature of evil men and the righteousness of the justice of God when it falls in judgment (1 Thess. 2:14-16). Suffering at the hands of people (persecution, violent treatments) is used of God to “fill up the measure of their sins.” It shows the evil character of those who persecute others and the justice of God’s judgment when it falls.

(8) We suffer to broaden our ministries (cf. Philippians 1:12-14 with 4:5-9). In the process of producing Christian character and enhancing our testimony to others, suffering often opens up doors for ministry we could never have imagined. Paul’s imprisonment (chained daily to Roman soldiers in his own house) resulted in the spread of the gospel within the elite imperial

praetorian guard. The Apostle was undoubtedly continuing to rejoice in the Lord, but if he had been complaining, sulking, and bitter, his witness would have been zero.