

Committed Christian Life

Understanding Suffering



*But grow in the grace and knowledge
of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*

2 Peter 3:18

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CBLT

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Understanding Suffering



Our world is full of suffering and many people are angry at God because of it—even believers! This lesson will help you develop a Biblical understanding of suffering and what our response to suffering should be. Yes, good people do suffer, but it does not mean God is not in control, nor that He is vindictive and delights in suffering. Rather He wants to use it in our lives.

This lesson is taken from the course *Committed Christian Life*. Other lessons in this course which you may desire to explore are:

- 1) “The Goal and Process of the Christian Life”
Do you know what the goal is? Are you struggling to be a “good” Christian? Learn what God wants to do in and through you in this supernatural life we are called to.
- 2) “The Power for the Spiritual Life”
Learn about the ministry of the Holy Spirit to unbelievers and believers and the three commands God’s Word gives us about the Holy Spirit.
- 3) “The War “
We are in a spiritual battle with a determined enemy. Learn about the evil one’s tactics and how to be victorious.
- 4) “Prayer: Worship and Praise”
Prayer is an expression of our relationship to God. Learn a fresh focus as you seek His face before you seek His hand.
- 5) “Prayer: Petition and Intercession”
Now with Almighty God in focus learn the joys of intercession. Included are the basic principles of prayer, hindrances to prayer and the importance of corporate prayer.
- 6) “Alive and Powerful — The Word Of God”
The Bible is our main source of communication from our Heavenly Father and the food of our spiritual lives. Learn how to make the most of this living, powerful resource.
- 7) “Walking By Faith”
The foundational principle of Kingdom living is faith. Learn how to deal with the challenges to faith as well as steps to knowing God’s will for your life.

8) “Spiritual Transformation”

What God has promised is that He will transform us by the power of His Holy Spirit so that we become like Him. This lesson will begin to answer the question: As a result of my walk with Christ, what changes in my character should take place?

10) “Fellowship in the Family”

Learn how to help build unity in the church, our “family”, how to deal with conflict and how to practice fellowship that honors Christ and brings joy to our hearts.

11) “Ministering To Your Fellowman”

This lesson which will challenge you as to examine how you can serve others. It will open your eyes to why God has given you gifts from His Holy Spirit, and how important it is for you to minister to those around you.

12) “Redeeming The Time”

What does the Bible say about work and how we should use our time? Do you know what your priorities are and do you set goals that reflect that? This lesson will help you redeem the time.

13) “Preparing for Revival”

There is much talk about revival, but little evidence of it. Take a look at the history of revivals and the principles we can use to bring revival now, here—in our own lives, in our church, in Ukraine.

Introduction

This lesson will attempt to present a true picture of suffering, as well as how God incorporates it into His plan for our lives today. We will also turn our attention to the future day when, for us Christians, all pain and sorrow will be done away with and when we will receive rewards for our faithfulness in the midst of suffering. After considering these basic perspectives on suffering, we will examine five possible ways God can use suffering in our lives and in the lives of others. Finally, we will focus on how our response to suffering determines what we will gain from it. We alone decide whether suffering will drive us to bitterness or toward spiritual maturity.

As you do this lesson, for the greatest benefit to your spiritual journey right now, we recommend three things:

- 1) Keep a spiritual journal, at least while you work your way through this lesson. This should include people and needs you are praying for, answers God gives and where you are reading in your Bible and what God is teaching you.
- 2) Make a goal to have a daily quiet time with the Lord. If you are in a leadership position we would challenge you to set aside an hour a day for one month. However if you do not already have a regular quiet time, start with a daily goal that you are willing to practice for one month.
- 3) Memorize 4 Bible verses. We suggest you choose 4 verses from Hebrews 11—the famous chapter on faith.

Throughout this lesson there are various questions, exercises and assignments that will help you interact with the material and apply it to your own life situation. Note that at the end of this lesson there is an answer key so that you may check your understanding of the material covered.

Use a notebook to write out your answers to the exercises. This is your “thinking” notebook so that you can put down your own answers and thoughts on what you are learning. Our learning is reinforced by writing it down so this is an excellent tool as you pursue growth in your personal life.

LESSON OUTLINE

- I. Biblical Perspectives on Suffering
 - A. The Origin of Suffering
 - B. God’s Use of Suffering
 - C. The End of Suffering
- II. Five Purposes of Suffering
 - A. Suffering Provides a Platform for Evangelism and Edification
 - B. Suffering Refines Our Perspective and Character
 - C. Suffering Disciplines Us for Disobedience
 - D. Suffering Enhances Our Relationships with People
 - E. Suffering Deepens Our Loyalty to Christ
- III. Our Response to Suffering
 - A. Our Preparation for Suffering
 - B. Our Reaction to Suffering

Conclusion

LESSON OBJECTIVES

At the end of this lesson you should be able to:

1. Briefly trace the history of suffering from its origin to its future role

2. List at least five possible reasons why God allows us to suffer
3. Cite at least one example of how God has used suffering in your life to achieve each of the five purposes covered in this lesson
4. Briefly explain two ways of preparing for suffering
5. Apply what you have learned to your current situation and share it with someone else

LESSON ASSIGNMENTS

1. Review the Lesson Outline and study the objectives.
2. Read this lesson and do the questions and exercises, referring to the Bible and the assigned readings as requested.
3. Reading assignment in this lesson:
Appendix — Suffering: A Biblical Survey
4. Spend an hour of quiet time every day. Think of what you can do to make this time fresh and alive.
5. Memorize four verses from Hebrews 11. This is the chapter of faith in the Bible with many examples of faith-filled people. If you are going to be effective in not only memorizing but meditating, it is important that you write these verses out and carry them with you. Read them off and on throughout the whole day. Think about them. Let memorization and meditation become a regular part of your life. And in this lesson you may want to focus on the last few verses which talk about suffering of faithful people.
6. Evaluate a current suffering in your life and what you can learn from it. Share these lessons with someone else. (Project)

I. Biblical Perspectives on Suffering

Every human being has at one time or another struggled with the reality of pain and suffering in the world. The vantage point from which you view suffering will determine how you respond to it. The clearer your perception of reality and of God and His world, the better able you will be to deal properly with pain and suffering. Consider Job. He knew that all things come from God and that He has a perfect right to do whatever He pleases with that which is His. He also knew that God never changes, and that, if God is worthy to be served when times are good, He is equally worthy to be served when times are bad.

Unfortunately, maintaining a balanced perspective in the midst of pain is easier said than done. Suffering has a way of dimming our view of God and reality. We slowly begin to sink into the quicksand of self-pity and become increasingly introspective. We slowly lose our grip on what is true. We start to entertain lies such as: «No one knows or cares about what I'm going through,» «God no longer loves me,» or «God is punishing me with more pain than I can possibly endure.» Instead of helping, 1 Corinthians 10:13 becomes for us nothing more than a cruel lie. «No one's suffering can be greater than mine,» is our cry. We have forgotten about those people down through the centuries who for their faith have been literally boiled alive in oil, slowly roasted on skewers over burning coals, had their skin peeled off strip by strip, and seen their children being tortured and slaughtered. «Oh, poor persecuted me!» we say. Let us look at some areas that will clarify our perspective.

A. The Origin of Suffering

Have you ever been asked, “How can a just and loving God allow so much suffering in the world?” Usually somewhere behind the question is the notion that suffering has always existed and that God is directly responsible for its existence. But the Bible declares this notion to be false. Nowhere in the account of creation do we find the words, “Then God said, ‘Let there be suffering and death.’” All that He made was declared to be very good. We must look elsewhere for the origin of suffering.

Turning to Genesis 3, we find that it was man himself who was responsible for the whole thing in the first place! He brought it all on himself. God not only wanted to prevent man from experiencing suffering and death, He went to great lengths to warn him concerning it. But man insisted on playing with the fire of disobedience and ended up not only burning himself but setting the whole of creation aflame. The fires of judgment in 2 Peter 3:12; Revelation 19:20, etc., only exist because of sin.

The painful groaning that Paul mentions in Romans 8:22 all began that day, thousands of years ago, when Adam and Eve took a step that resulted in human agony beyond calculation.

In Genesis 3:4 Satan, speaking through the serpent, sets a trap by telling the biggest lie of all time. He not only promised that Adam and Eve would not suffer and die but that their lives would be far better than they had ever been. Offering them the prospect of heaven, he lured them to the very edge of the precipice of hell.

In a perverted way, though, what Satan promised came true. Their eyes **were** opened. They **did** become like God, knowing good and evil. But what piteous and impotent gods they turned out to be! And the price tag that was attached for all of mankind: thousands of years of suffering and death on earth and an eternity of suffering and never-ending death in hell. Thanks be to God who graciously intervenes and saves those who turn to Him in faith.

The account of the Fall’s consequences is listed in Genesis 3:8-19. Read the passage, and then write the answers to the following questions



Question 1 Locate as many examples as you can of either physical or psychological suffering mentioned in this passage.



Question 2 The external pressures bearing in upon Adam produced his suffering. List two or three similar kinds of suffering we could face.

All suffering and death, then, have their point of origin in sin.^{1*} Their existence bears witness to the awful results of rebelling against God the Creator. So, whenever we hear of or experience great

¹ Paul gives Adam the credit in Romans 5:12 for the entrance of sin, suffering, and death into the earthly realm. Satan’s act of disobedience would be the source of suffering and death in the angelic realm. This is not to say that Satan did not have an active role in Adam’s sin or that he does not presently bring about suffering on earth, as he did in Job 1 and 2.

affliction and pain, our first reaction should not be, «Look how unfair God is!» but rather, «Look how terrible sin is!» Whatever else we learn from suffering, it should constantly remind us that it is ultimately the consequence of Adam’s declaration of independence from God’s plan.

Mankind’s natural reaction is either to pretend that suffering and death do not exist or to avoid at all costs any encounter with them. When forced to deal with suffering and death, man tries to beautify it as much as possible. For instance, at funerals corpses are made to look like they are only asleep. It is as if deep down man knows that suffering and death are an indication that something is terribly wrong with him and his world, but he constantly tries to suppress it. Too often we are no different in our handling of suffering and death. We will look more closely at this issue in the last section of this lesson.

B. God’s Use of Suffering

Even though the world is still reeling from that tragic day in the Garden, God is still in command. All is not lost! He is wisely using suffering, as well as sin and evil, to bring glory to Himself by enhancing His reputation among men. Suffering is a megaphone employed by God to get man’s attention and to teach him more about Himself. He desires for all men to clearly see His attributes and acknowledge His greatness.

Satan, on the other hand, attempts to reverse this megaphone (attention-getting) effect by using suffering to belittle God in the eyes of the world. He tries to convince us when we are suffering that God has lost control and that our suffering is a result of His poor management of the events of the universe. He also tries to convince us that God is a cruel God and enjoys making us suffer or that He is so stupid that He does not know how to keep us from suffering. Satan implies that, if he were God, he would handle things much better; there would be no suffering at all.

Thus, we see suffering’s great potential for either enhancing our view of God or distorting it. Let us go to the book of Job to examine this more carefully. Read Job 1:6-2:10. On the basis of this passage, answer the following questions:



Question 3 In 1:8 and 2:3 we see that no one on earth was as righteous as Job. Why, then, was there so much at stake in the testing of Job?



Question 4 What did God’s allowing Satan to afflict Job indicate about God’s attitude towards Job?

God’s love for us never changes, especially in the midst of suffering. As we shall see later, even if one of the purposes of suffering is to discipline us because of our disobedience, God’s love remains constant. This fact is crucial to remember if we hope to face affliction with the proper attitude. Nothing enters our lives without first passing through God’s wise and loving hands (Rom. 8:28).

When we suffer, God whispers in one ear, “I still love you and am confident in your ability to grow through this by trusting Me.” But at the same time, Satan whispers in the other ear, “God hates you! Why else would He put you through all this pain and destroy your life?”



Question 5 Using 1:20-22 and 2:9, 10, summarize in your own words Job’s two responses. What did he say about God?

God's reputation, then, is greatly enhanced in the eyes of those around us as they see us following Job's example and patiently enduring suffering. They see that our God is so great in and of Himself that we will continue to worship and praise Him no matter how difficult our circumstances may be. For this very reason God will often **not** deliver us from a particular affliction so that people will be able to glorify Him as they see His grace enabling us to patiently endure.

We read in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 that it is sometimes God's will to allow us to remain in painful and difficult situations rather than deliver us miraculously out of them. The question is not whether He can or cannot deliver but how He will gain the most glory from the situation. Read through this passage, and answer the following questions:



Question 6 The thorn remained, but a real miracle did occur in Paul's life. What was it?



Question 7 How do afflictions and weaknesses magnify God's grace and power?

So we see that God does not have to miraculously heal us or deliver us out of our particular affliction in order for men to see His power. Certainly His power is greatly manifested when He does these miracles of healing, etc., but this does not mean that His power cannot be equally, or perhaps more greatly, demonstrated as He enables us to respond joyfully to even the harshest of tests. It seems clear that the Jerusalem saints prayed just as fervently for James' release as they did for Peter's. Yet the sword was the only "deliverance" those prayers brought about for James. But, assuming that James faced his death filled with God's love and grace, God's power was displayed in both of these deliverances (Acts 12). We tell the world that our God is so worthy of our service that, whether He "miraculously" delivers us or not, we will continue to serve Him. This is the same message that the three Hebrew children voiced to King Nebuchadnezzar when they said,

*Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. **But even if He does not**, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up (Dan. 3:17-18). (The bold is ours.)*

May God give to you a similar heart of courage and commitment to Him in the face of your fiery trials!

C. The End of Suffering

C. S. Lewis, a well-known Christian author, once said, “Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home.”² And the way God often does this is by allowing us to suffer. Suffering has a way of loosening our ties to this world and focusing our eyes expectantly on that future world where there will be no more pain. The instability of this life is magnified as we long for the permanence of our future life.

The fact of heavenly rewards also spurs us on in the midst of our trials. Our sufferings do not go unnoticed by God. He records all of our responses to our various afflictions, whether great or small, and will reward us accordingly. An athlete, encouraged by the future prospect of winning the prize, is willing to endure all kinds of physical hardships. A mother, encouraged by the future prospect of bringing a new life into the world, is likewise willing to endure much pain and discomfort. How much more can we find encouragement in our sufferings, knowing that our rewards will be far greater.

The New Testament frequently introduces the concept of heaven and rewards into its discussion of suffering and persecution. Rewards, however, are not presented as the ultimate reason for patiently enduring suffering. Our great God deserves our obedience regardless of how many rewards we will receive. Rather, rewards are to be seen simply as tokens of God’s appreciation for faithful service. They provide extra incentive when times get tough. It is a little like an employee upon retirement receiving a new car and a four-week paid vacation at the Black Sea from his employer. He does not work faithfully for thirty years solely because he knows he will receive these things. But they do provide him with a little boost now and then.³

With regard to the future of suffering, the New Testament makes it clear that pain and affliction as well as death itself are doomed to extinction, as far as the believer is concerned. For us suffering is as temporary as this present world is. It is not part of God’s perfect plan for our future. The consequences for the unbeliever are another matter. Since suffering has its root in sin and unbelievers refuse to come to Christ for forgiveness, they must continue to endure suffering and the second death forever.

Read Romans 8:18-25. This is one of the classic passages that relates suffering to our future, glorious state. After a careful reading, answer the following questions:



Question 8 Why is the present creation so eagerly awaiting the revealing of the sons of God? What is the nature of this revelation?

² C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962) 115.

³ For some additional passages on suffering and our future hope, see the following: Matthew 5:10-12, John 14:1-3; 16:20-22, Romans 8:18-25, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 15:50-58, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18; 5:1-10, Philippians 2:16, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, 2 Thessalonians 1:4-10, 1 Timothy 4:6-8, Hebrews 10:32-39; 11:32-40; 12:1-3; James 1:12; 5:7-11, and 1 Peter 1:3-9, 13.



Question 9 Describe in your own words what Paul means by the “groaning” of creation.

There is a difference between the joy that James says we should have when we undergo various trials (Jas. 1:2) and the joy about which Paul writes. The first results from knowing that our sufferings have the capability of producing not only maturity but also heavenly rewards. But this kind of joy, Paul implies, is mixed with a certain degree of groaning. The groaning joy of an expectant mother differs from the unshackled, exuberant joy she exhibits immediately after birth when she actually sees and hears the fruit of her labor. Therefore, the second kind of joy, when we see Christ face to face in our glorified bodies, will be unhindered by suffering, sin, or any such pain. It will be pure joy!



Question 10 Read 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. In this passage, as well as in Romans 8, how does Paul encourage us to persevere in our afflictions?

This forward-looking perspective is another important aspect in handling suffering properly. To the degree that we take our eyes off the future, our sufferings will begin to overwhelm us. Therefore, it is wise to follow Peter’s admonition when he says, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ» (1 Pet. 1:13). We will all one day be changed and put on immortality. We will all one day be victorious over death and suffering.

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58).



Exercise 1

Why do we suffer? Suppose someone came to you and asked, “If God is just and loving, why is there so much suffering in the world?” Based on the material you have studied so far in this lesson, how would you answer him? Write out your response, and be prepared to discuss it in your group meeting.

II. Five Purposes of Suffering

The well-known verse of Romans 8:28, “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” indicates that God uses even suffering in a good and meaningful way in our lives (Refer also to Ephesians 1:11-12). This fact was clearly seen in our discussion of God’s use of suffering. Now we want to look more closely at a few reasons why God sometimes allows suffering to touch us.

God has a purpose in everything that He does. This does not mean that, every time something happens to us, He is trying to teach us a particular lesson. Certainly we need to ask for wisdom in the midst of our trials in order to discern, the best we can, if God is trying to get our attention for some specific purpose. But we should not always expect God to give a full and detailed account of His actions. This is where Job seemed to lose his way (Job 31:35; 19:7; 30:20-21). God is sovereignly in control of every detail of our lives and has a specific and wise purpose in everything that comes our way. But He does not always choose to make that specific purpose known to us. Usually, we must be content with knowing the general purpose.

An important thing to remember is that suffering, as well as life itself, loses all meaning if a wise and all-powerful God is not in control. Indeed, the most difficult tragedies are those which on the surface appear to have been colossal mistakes and seem absolutely senseless. But at these times we need to suspend judgment until that future day when all of the facts will come to light. Then we will see how well God knew what He was doing.



Take a few minutes right now before reading further to think of a recent trial in your life or in the life of someone close to you that appears to you to be a cruel “accident”. Then pray and ask God to renew your faith in His sovereign and purposeful control of the situation.

A. Suffering Provides a Platform for Evangelism and Edification

When someone suffers, people--Christians and non-Christians alike--tend to notice. The more severe the suffering, the more attentive they are to every word said and every response made. Whether you like it or not, suffering thrusts you out onto the stage. The only question is how good your performance will be.

When the non-Christian sees you suffering physical pain and yet not complaining, he sits up and takes notice. When he sees you rejoicing and praising God after losing your family or being imprisoned, he is amazed. And when he sees you actually showing love and concern for those who are beating and physically abusing you, he is awestruck.

Read Acts 16:19-34, where Paul and Silas’ imprisonment at Philippi is recorded. Then answer the following questions:



Question 11 What fact probably caused the prisoners to listen more attentively to Paul and Silas as they sang and prayed?



Question 12 Identify several “miracles” that apparently prepared the jailer’s heart to seek after and believe in Christ.

We do not know how greatly Stephen’s death affected the young zealot Saul, but no doubt Stephen’s angelic face haunted him for many days. In any case, Paul followed Stephen’s example when he faced his own unjust persecutions, including even stoning.

Few things arouse the interest of an unbeliever more than seeing someone unjustly suffer, yet with patience. This type of response is so rare that the world hardly even has a category under which to

classify it. But the point is, when we «turn the other cheek» and love and pray for our enemies, the unbeliever is bound to ask himself, “What kind of person is this? Where does he get the strength to respond this way? I wonder how he can keep on thanking God in the midst of such unfair suffering?” They begin to think there is some truth to Christianity after all. They say, “Your God must be great if you keep serving Him even when it appears that He is punishing you for no reason!”

Read 1 Peter 2:11-3:6, and then answer the questions in the following exercise:



Exercise 2

Exploring 1 Peter 2:11—3:6.

- a. In verse 21 for what purpose does Peter say we have been called?
- b. Why do you think Peter introduces the example of Christ’s suffering into his discussion?
- c. In verses 1 and 2 submission has the potential of winning a husband, wife, or anyone to Christ. Do these verses and the rest of the passage teach that submission always causes a positive response in people toward the gospel? Explain your response.

Read Luke 21:10-19. Here Jesus predicts that His followers will be persecuted because of their faith in Him and that a platform (i.e., opportunity) for evangelism will result. He then explains that the key to success in facing sufferings is not well-thought-through strategies but rather total dependence upon God.

Suffering also provides an opportunity for the edification of believers. They not only learn from a living example how to patiently endure this life’s trials but also gain a larger and more accurate view of God in the process.

Read Acts 17:1-10 and 1 Thessalonians 1:1-2:2.

After being severely beaten and imprisoned in Philippi, Paul and Silas continued to remain faithful to the proclamation of the gospel. Their reward was more intense opposition in Thessalonica. But they continued undaunted, following in the footsteps of Christ.

These events were not going unnoticed by the Thessalonians however. They faithfully imitated the example of Paul and his friends when their own persecutions came. But it did not stop there. The Thessalonians’ response became known to believers all over that region. Paul himself, as he traveled far and wide, made proud mention of their perseverance and faith as he spoke to the churches.

Notice the chain reaction effect that suffering provides. As news spreads like ripples in a pond, many believers have the opportunity to learn about God and about how they should respond to their own afflictions. Some, like Job, even have the privilege of having their sufferings permanently recorded so that the effect can reach across many generations. May we, like Job, be faithful in the midst of our sufferings. May we give the watching eyes of the world an example worthy to be followed.

B. Suffering Refines Our Perspective and Character

Growing pains are not an indication that something is wrong. On the contrary, they indicate that something is very right. All growth, even on the spiritual level, is accompanied by a certain amount of discomfort. To move from a lower level of proficiency or accomplishment to a higher one always requires work and a certain amount of pain. This holds true for the athlete and the scholar, as well as for the Christian.

One way, then, to look at suffering and temptation is as a series of growth points or tests. God allows suffering, temptation, and testing to come into our lives with the hope that growth will result as we respond in faith. After one test is passed, we can be sure that another one is on the way to prod us to further growth.

Satan, naturally, is hoping that the suffering or temptation will retard or stop our growth altogether as we fail the test through lack of faith. God wants to build up our character through suffering. Satan wants to destroy it. In this light all suffering can be viewed under the larger category of testing or temptation. Not all temptation or testing involves suffering in the general sense of the word, but all suffering can be seen as a certain kind of testing. When we suffer, we have the option of obeying God in faith or listening to Satan in unbelief. We can grow, stagnate, or regress. It is our choice.

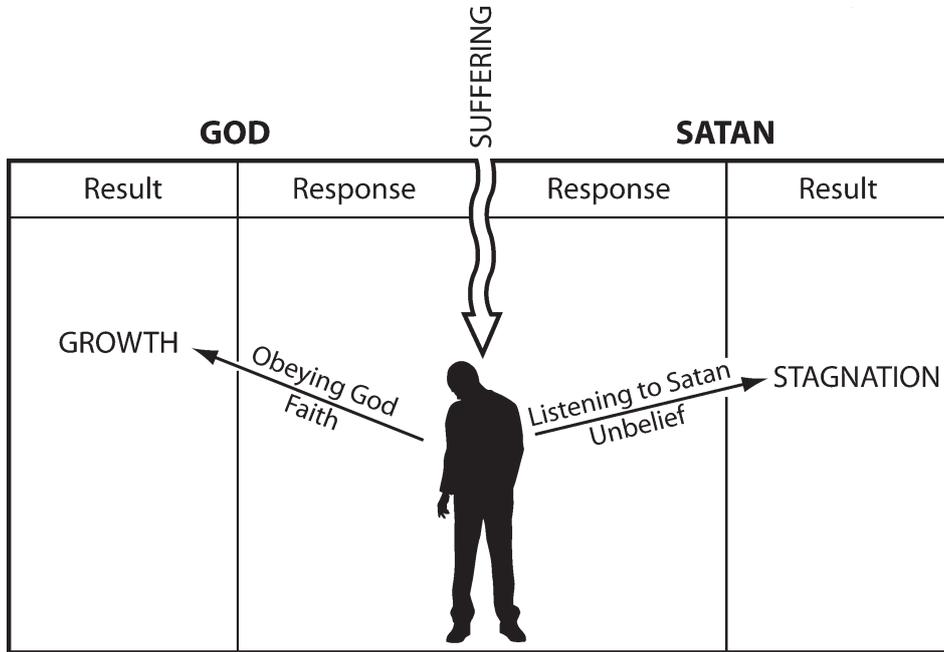


Diagramm 9-1

Suffering also develops and refines our perspective of God and life. Sometimes, when we are racing busily through life, God allows suffering to occur to slow us down. This helps us to take more notice of the priorities in life and prevents us from getting wrapped up in peripheral activities.

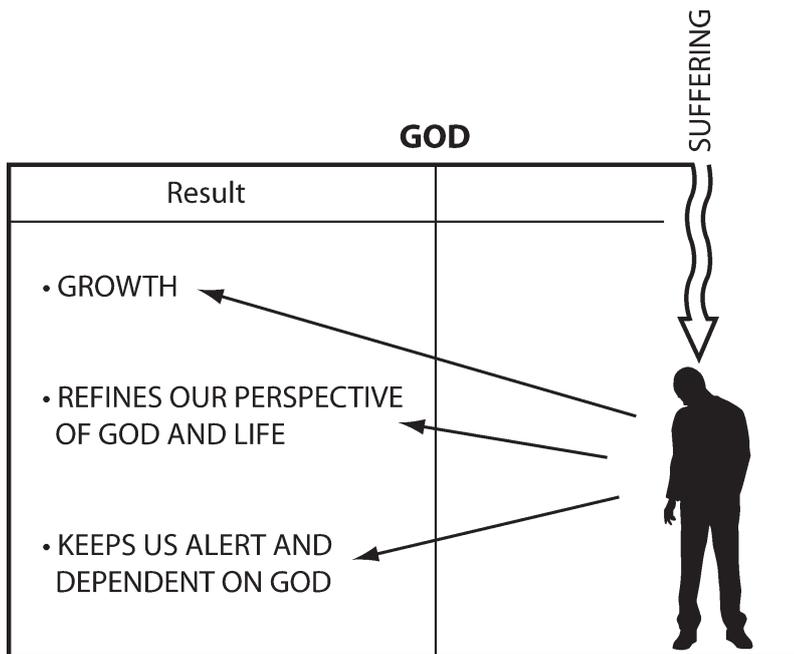


Diagramm 9-2

Suffering also keeps us alert. Lapsing into spiritual complacency is always a risk, but suffering motivates us to depend upon God more consistently instead of ourselves. Sometimes highway engineers design curves in the roads to keep drivers from falling asleep at the wheel, which often occurs on long, straight stretches of road. It is possible that Solomon had this principle in mind in Ecclesiastes 7:13-14.

God was more interested in having Job's sufferings help to refine his character. Review Job 1 and 2; read chapters 3, 38, 40:1-14, and 42:1-9. Then answer the following questions:



Question 13 Job did not curse God. What did he curse? Why? Was this response a mature one? Explain.



Question 14 Using 38:1-4 and 40:1-9, summarize what God said about Job's response to his sufferings.



Question 15 In the discussion about nature, what two divine attributes does God emphasize over and over again? What does this say about Job's perspective of God? Did Job understand what God was saying to him?



Question 16 Regarding suffering, what comfort can we gain from knowing that God is omnipotent and omniscient?

From the beginning of Job’s story it is clear that God was in total control of the situation. Satan did nothing without God’s permission. God decided the limits based upon His wisdom and goodness. Knowing these things can give us great comfort in the midst of our afflictions.

At the beginning Job did give abundant evidence that he knew his God. He acknowledged God to be the Lord of all, worthy of man’s worship at all times. Yet, by the end of the book it is evident that he still had some things to learn about God. And learn he did. Job knew God much better after his ordeal.

Suffering not only refines our perspective of God and life, but it also can be used by God to refine and purify our faith and character.

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:6-7).

Using suffering, God chisels away at those parts of our character that do not reflect His image. Each one of us, in this sense, is still “under construction”. The saying, “Be patient with me; God is not finished with me yet”, is very true.

Read James 1:2-4 and Romans 5:1-5. These two passages deal with the process of suffering and its results. After carefully comparing them, answer the following questions:



Question 17 Summarize what suffering and temptation can produce in our lives, according to these two passages.



Exercise 3

The end product of suffering is hope. Explain what you think the Bible means by this concept. See Romans 5:2 and 8:23-25. How does this kind of hope compare to James’ final product? See James 1:12.

These kinds of character qualities and perspectives are something that we, as Christians, all want. But notice the price tag that is attached. We must be willing to endure pain in some sense before any growth can occur in our lives. Seen in this light, afflictions can and should produce real joy instead of distress and bitterness.

C. Suffering Disciplines Us for Disobedience

While Job's three friends learned that there are other reasons for suffering besides sin, we know that disobedience is sometimes the reason we experience suffering.

In the Old Testament, blessing generally resulted from obedience, and misery and pain resulted from disobedience. You can find examples of this in Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28; Judges; Amos 1-2; and others. God used suffering to make people aware of their sins so they would turn from them. For the believer and unbeliever alike this type of suffering is really an evidence of God's love and desire that no one should continue on in an unrepentant state of rebellion.

Our heavenly Father is concerned enough about us as believers to discipline us for our lack of obedience. Read Hebrews 12:5-13.



Question 18 Hebrews 12:5-6 quotes from Proverbs. What do these verses remind us of in order to keep us from losing heart when we are being disciplined for our sins?



Exercise 4

Why do you think we so easily forget the benefits of discipline when we are being disciplined? How can we remedy this?

If we submit ourselves to God's training program of discipline, we will begin to become more like Him. This means refusing to be stubborn and rebellious when God decides we need a good "spanking". If we continue to rebel, His "spankings" will become more severe.

Some of the Corinthians were sinning in their practice of the Lord's Supper. They were shaming the poor believers in their midst by sumptuously feasting before partaking of the Lord's Supper. Paul had to remind them of the seriousness of the ordinance. See 1 Corinthians 11:20-34.

Suffering may be an indication that we have sinned, but not necessarily. We should examine ourselves when we do suffer to be sure that God is not trying to call our attention to some sin. Job did this and declared that, as far as he could determine, God was not disciplining him for some sin (see Job 27:1-6, for example). Most of us do not have to be told to do this because every time we suffer we tend to think that we have done something wrong. Therefore, we need to guard against too much introspection and unnecessary guilt. The Holy Spirit will reveal our sins to us. All we need do is pay attention.

In any event, we need to ask God to give us His wisdom and perspective in our afflictions so that we can determine, as much as possible, whether we are experiencing "growing pains" or "spanking pains". And, if God chooses not to give us any "reason" for our trials, we need to follow Job's example of endurance, trusting that God is still in control and that He loves us.

D. Suffering Enhances Our Relationships with People

Unfortunately, it sometimes takes suffering to open our eyes to the fact that people are important. Things and activities so easily blur our vision. But suffering can clear away the fog and allow God Himself and people around us to emerge as the only things of real value.

It is often true that the petty differences that separate people from one another are not put aside until suffering pushes them aside. Suffering causes us to re-evaluate the criteria we use to determine with whom we will build relationships. Through suffering we are drawn to people we might normally exclude. Channels of communication are opened up between us and a greater variety of people. Opportunities for ministry increase.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-11 and 7:5-7, and then answer the following questions:



Question 19 God is the ultimate source of all comfort. But what means does He often use to comfort us, according to these passages?



Question 20 When we suffer, what is it that is being developed in us that enables us to comfort others?



Question 21 Paul encouraged the Corinthians to help him regarding his Asian afflictions by praying for him. When many people pray for a suffering individual, what is multiplied as the prayers are answered (2 Cor. 1:11)?

When we share in the suffering of another person through our prayers and encouragement, we experience a greater degree of Christian unity with him. We learn to comfort. He learns to be comforted and, in turn, to comfort others. As the quality of interpersonal relationships in the body of Christ increases, greater unity results.

Unfortunately, it does not always work that way. Even when God allows suffering to touch a particular part of His body (a local church) in order to unify it, that church sometimes continues to be contentious and divisive.

The church at Corinth had this problem. Divisiveness was a principal characteristic of this church. This forms the backdrop for Paul's illuminating analogy of the human body in 1 Corinthians 12. He says that God has designed the human body to be a cooperating unit that cares for itself. And His design for the body of Christ is exactly the same.



Question 22 Read 1 Corinthians 12:26. What is Paul's point here concerning suffering?

E. Suffering Deepens Our Loyalty to Christ

If you have ever served in the military during wartime or lived through a catastrophe or some other crisis situation, you know by experience that a special camaraderie develops among those in-

volved. We are attracted to people who have had the same kinds of experiences that we have had. Note David and Jonathan in this regard (1 Sam. 18:1-4). This bond apparently developed quickly because Jonathan saw much of himself in David. They both were extremely courageous and both single-handedly defeated the Philistines against all odds (see 1 Sam. 14:1-15 and chapter 17).

The “enemy” might be persecution from unbelievers, an earthquake, or some other form of suffering. But, as we fight against it shoulder to shoulder with our friends, we grow more committed to them as well as to the cause for which we are fighting. Paul touches on this idea in Philippians 1:27. It can be translated, “fighting side by side for the sake of the gospel.”

Since the world persecuted Christ, we as His servants can expect no better treatment. Many New Testament passages emphasize our privilege and calling as partakers of the same kind of suffering that Christ endured. (Matthew 10:24-25; John 15:18-16:4; Romans 8:17; 2 Corinthians 1:5; 4:10; Philippians 1:29; 3:10; Colossians 1:24; 2 Timothy 2:3, 12; 3:12; 1 Peter 2:21; 4:1, 13-16).

In Acts 5:17-42 Peter and the apostles experienced rather intense persecution for the cause of Christ. After being arrested the second time, they so provoked the Jewish leaders that they were almost killed immediately (v. 33). But, instead, their backs were beaten raw, and they were ordered again not to preach the gospel.



Exercise 5

Read Acts 5:41-42. Why do you think the apostles considered it a privilege to suffer such harsh treatment for Christ’s sake? Write your answer in your notebook.

Satan and our earthly persecutors see affliction as a means of stopping the spread of the gospel. But it usually has the opposite effect if we have eyes to see the privilege involved. Church history demonstrates over and over again that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

Suffering has the potential of strengthening our commitment to Christ, but it also reveals the depth of our present devotion to the Lord. If it only takes a small amount of affliction to hinder our obedience to Christ, then we know that our loyalty to Him is not very deep.

One event that must have served to renew Peter’s loyalty to Christ after his denial of Him was his first-hand view of Christ’s agony on the cross. Christ’s example of suffering, which Peter mentions in 1 Peter 2:21, was not complete until after His death on the cross. Therefore, after Pentecost, when Peter and the other apostles realized more fully how much Christ had suffered for them, their afflictions seemed to shrink by comparison.



Question 23 Read Hebrews 12:1-4. What are two reasons given here for not growing weary in the “race” to which God has called us?

Suffering has the potential of deepening our love for Christ as we gain a small glimpse of the pain that He underwent for us. Each time we suffer unjustly, we should pause a moment to remember His agony in the garden and suffering on the cross.



Exercise 6

Take a moment now to review the five purposes of suffering just discussed. List them in your notebook, and then give one example from your own life of how God has used suffering to achieve each of these purposes.

III. Our Response to Suffering

Some people run from it; others deny its existence. Some try to apply cosmetics to it. How do you respond to suffering in your life as well as in the lives of others? As we noted at the beginning of the lesson, our response determines what we will learn from suffering.

The emphasis throughout the Bible is that man is responsible for the choices he makes. He may or may not be responsible for the situation in which he finds himself, but he is **always** responsible for the choice he makes in that situation.

When suffering comes our way, we need not spend long hours or days pondering all of the why's behind it. Our main focus should be upon how we respond.

A. Our Preparation for Suffering

When a crisis is thrust upon us, it is too late to prepare for it. At that point our perspective and resultant actions will be in accordance with those thought patterns that we have already developed. The key is advance preparation.

Picture the doorway to your mind as being covered with a net. The better you understand reality as portrayed in God's Word, the more compact the strands of the net become. Now imagine lies as stones or small pebbles. The finer the net, the fewer the lies that find their way into your mind.

"God hates me." "It isn't worth enduring this suffering any longer." "I must have sinned somewhere." "This suffering violates my rights as God's child." These are some of the lies that pound on our mind's door, seeking entrance. But the more we saturate our minds with Biblical perspectives, the better will be our ability to face suffering. What we believe inside will determine what we live outside. See Proverbs 4:23 and Mark 7:20-23.

Another aspect of preparing for suffering involves fear. Fear makes pain unbearable. It can cripple us psychologically and even physically. Because of it, we rationalize all kinds of irresponsible and disobedient behavior.



Question 24 Read Matthew 10:24-31. In this passage Jesus warns us three times "Do not fear." What two things does He command us to do?

There is a natural human fear (like that which Jesus experienced in the garden) which is not wrong to have. No one relishes or looks forward to pain. We have a natural emotional reaction against it. The fear Jesus warns against, though, can be thought of as fearful behavior. In Gethsemane He submitted His will to the Father and went to the cross "fearlessly", even though, being human like us, He had an emotional dread of it.

Jesus **commands** us to do likewise. Commands are directed at our wills. We have little or no control over the emotional side of fear, being human beings with built-in defense mechanisms. But we can control how we respond to those emotions and to the situation in which we find ourselves. Disobedience to any of Christ's commands is never justified because we are afraid. A realistic view

of fear is an excellent preparation for the suffering we will face throughout our lives. For some verses on fear see: Psalms 27:1; 46:1-3; 91:1-16, Proverbs 3:25-26; 29:25, Isaiah 2:22, Matthew 24:6, Luke 12:32, John 14:1, 27; 16:33, 1 Peter 3:6, and 1 John 4:17-18. The Psalms can greatly comfort us when we are facing trouble, for in them we see how others responded in faith in the midst of fear.

B. Our Reaction to Suffering

Many Christians fall into the trap of thinking that to really bring glory to God, we must be involved in big, spectacular efforts to reach the world for Christ. Little do they realize that one of the most spectacular ways of bringing glory to God is simply giving thanks and praising Him in the midst of suffering.

Job sat quietly on an ash heap somewhere in the land of Uz. No matter how insignificant he felt, his patient and worshipful reaction to intense suffering still brings glory to God centuries later. That is pretty spectacular, is it not?

But it is difficult to be thankful in the midst of severe trials. It is not natural. If anything, we tend to become bitter, thinking that we have some sort of right to a painless existence.

Christ is the ultimate example of one who left all the comforts of His heavenly home in order to suffer a painful death on earth. He relinquished His right to exist solely in the divine form in which God the Father and the Holy Spirit exist. He laid aside the privilege that He had enjoyed up until that point of reigning with the Father and Spirit in heaven. His throne was “vacant” for a little more than three decades.



Question 25 Read Philippians 2:3-11. In this passage the character quality of humility is mentioned in connection with the laying aside of one’s rights. How are these two concepts related, and how does humility aid us in facing suffering?

Any basis for bitterness is eliminated once we are willing to relinquish any and all of the privileges that we now enjoy as God’s children. When Job faced his suffering, there was, initially at least, no bitterness in his life. He knew that everything he was and possessed was God’s and that therefore he could not claim anything as being “his”. He was thus truly able to fulfill God’s will for him by “giving thanks in all things”.

Suffering is one of the experiences that God uses to teach us to be content and thankful in all things (Phil. 4:11-12). Once we learn the “secret” of being content in all circumstances, disobedience loses its attraction for us. We become satisfied with following God in good times as well as in bad. The more content we are with what God has for us, the less tempted we are to become bitter.



Included for your reference are the results of a survey titled “SUFFERING: A Biblical Survey”, in the Appendix. Take time to read through that now.



PROJECT: Reaction to Suffering

Choose a difficulty in your life right now. Make a list of how you feel God can use it in your life. How can you change your response to this so God can get glory from it? List some verses that you have found helpful in this lesson in understanding and enduring suffering. Over the next week share with someone else (a fellow sufferer) what God has been teaching you in your difficulty and some of the verses you have found helpful. Submit your findings as well as a report of who you shared with and any results from that.

Conclusion

What you gain from suffering depends on how you react to it. And how you react to suffering depends on your perspective.

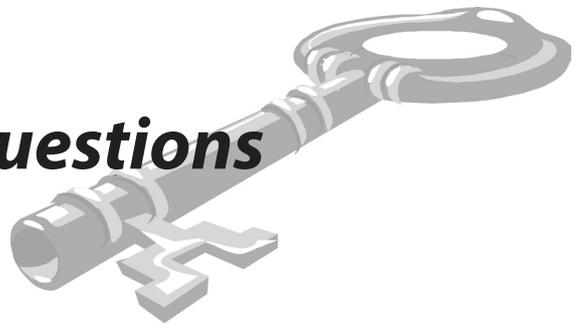
Suffering entered the universe with sin and rebellion, not before. Angels and men brought it upon themselves. And yet God is wisely using suffering in the present to accomplish His good purposes. One day He will remove it altogether, along with sin and death, from the lives of those who recognize Him as Lord of all.

Suffering thrusts us onto the stage and turns the spotlight on us. Everyone is watching to see just how great we believe our God is. May we, like Job, magnify His greatness to the world in adversity as well as in prosperity.

And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. To Him be dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet. 5:10-11)

If you have enjoyed this lesson you may want to continue with other lessons from *Committed Christian Life*. There is so much to learn, and sometimes just to review, as we walk along this spiritual journey. There is a complete listing of the lessons at the beginning, each one focused to help you in some aspect of your spiritual life.

Answers to questions



Question 1

Examples of suffering are:

- Adam and Eve's fear and guilt (v. 10)
- Serpent's permanently handicapped body
- Eve's physical pain in childbearing (v. 16)
- Adam's painful labor in earning a living (vv. 17-19)
- The physical death of not just Adam but all living things

Note: Another example might be found in verse 15, a rather complicated verse. The conflict here and its resulting suffering might exist in as many as three areas: (1) the physical conflict between reptiles related to the serpent and human beings (some would say women in particular), (2) the conflict between Satan and human beings, and (3) the conflict between Satan and the Son of Man, Jesus Christ.

Question 2

Your answer

Some examples are: pressure on the job, drought, famine, persecution from unbelievers, inflation, illness, death, financial insecurity of retired people.

Question 3

Job was God's first choice, and if he failed, the implication would be that all other men at that time would fail the test also.

Question 4

God's allowing Satan to afflict Job indicated that He had such a high respect for Job and his character that He was confident enough to allow him to be tested. Job's trials, then, did not mean that God now hated him, for actually the exact opposite was true.

Question 5

In 1:20-22 Job worshiped God, saying that all things came from Him and were His and that He had a perfect right to do whatever He pleased with them. (Note: We will look at this area of rights as it relates to our response to suffering in the last section of the lesson.) In 2:10 he says that God is in control of all circumstances and implies that He knows what He is doing in each case. Also he implies that God is so great that He is worthy to be served in bad times as well as in good.

Question 6

The miracle was Paul's response to his afflictions. He was able to keep giving thanks in all of his various trials because of the power of God's grace in his life.

Question 7

Afflictions and weaknesses thrust us more completely upon God and His strength so that, when we triumph in our sufferings, it is obvious that we are only doing so because of His grace at work in us. Therefore, the more numerous and severe our trials, the more obvious it becomes that there is Someone supernatural enabling us to endure victoriously. Thus, the world sees more of God's power and grace in us.

Question 8

Considering the ends of verses 18, 19, 21, and 23 of Romans 8 to refer to the same event, the revelation of the sons of God is that day when Christians will receive their perfect, immortal, and glorified bodies, devoid of all sins and suffering. At the same time Creation itself will be set free from the chains that original sin placed on it (cf. 1 Cor. 15:51-54; 1 Pet. 1:13; Phil. 3:21).

Question 9

Your answer

As the burden of this fallen world along with our fallen bodies presses down upon our spirits, we along with creation suffer what Paul calls the “pains of childbirth” as we eagerly wait for our future release from this constant pressure (see 2 Corinthians 5:1-4; cf. Philippians 1:22-24; Solomon’s “groaning” in the book of Ecclesiastes also seem to be very similar to those described by Paul).

Question 10

He does so by reminding us that our future, eternal glory is immeasurably greater than our small, temporary trials. He sees this future hope as something that is absolutely certain and therefore something that we should not lose patience waiting for.

Question 11

The prisoners listened more attentively due to the fact that they were severely beaten a few hours before. They might have even heard that the reason for their beating was the healing of a demon-possessed girl.

Question 12

The following miracles prepared the jailor’s heart:

- a. Paul and Silas’ supernatural response after being severely beaten
- b. The earthquake opening all the doors and loosing all the chains
- c. Everyone then remaining in their cells

Question 13

Job cursed the day of his birth. Because of his great pain and suffering, both mental as well as physical, Job cries out wishing that he were never born.

This is a difficult question. If you break your arm, it is certainly not wrong to cry out in pain. Job himself in 6:26 seems to justify his words in this manner. It still could be argued, though, that, even if he really did not mean what he said, he still went too far in giving vent to his bitterness. It seems that his response was not the most mature one but that under the circumstances it was perfectly understandable. By the end of the book, though, it is clear that he has gone too far, and God rebukes him for it. For other examples, see Jeremiah 20:14-18; and 1 Kings 19:4.

Question 14

In Job 38:1-4 God stated that Job had too high an estimation of his own wisdom and then proceeded to give him a more realistic view of himself. He even challenged Job to give Him a lesson on the creation of the universe. In 40:1-9 He says that Job went too far in questioning His ways (note v. 8, «Will you condemn Me that you may be justified?»). In sum, God said that Job essentially was placing himself on a level equal with Himself, and God’s answer, in the form of a lesson in nature, was an attempt to demonstrate to Job the ridiculousness of doing this.

Question 15

His omnipotence (and sovereign control) and His omniscience (and wisdom) («Can you **do** this?» «Do you **know** about that?») are emphasized. Job had in the midst of his trials forgotten just how great, powerful, and wise God really is. Job understood. In 42:1-6 he acknowledges that God truly is omnipotent («Thou canst do all things,» v. 2) and omniscient (vv. 3 and 4).

Question 16

Because of God's omnipotence, we know that He is in control even when we suffer. Nothing will happen to us by chance; everything has a purpose in His plan. He will not allow us to be afflicted beyond what we can endure. Because God is omniscient, He knows what He is doing at all times, even when we are suffering. He knows what is best for us and will never sadistically punish us. Remembering these things in the midst of suffering can make all the difference in our response to it.

Question 17

Suffering and temptation produce maturity.

Question 18

God still loves us as His sons, and that is why He bothers to take the time to discipline us.

Question 19

God often uses other Christians to comfort us. In 2 Corinthians 1:4-6 we see that God expects us to comfort others with the comfort with which He has comforted us in our afflictions. In 7:5-7 God used both Titus and the Corinthian brethren to comfort Paul.

Question 20

Compassion and sensitivity are being developed in us. The more we suffer, the more we can empathize with the sufferings of others. Joni Eareckson Tada, a quadriplegic who is a well-known Christian speaker and writer, had a whole new world of opportunities open up as a result of her accident. She can now offer comfort not only to other quadriplegics but to all who are suffering. Her personal relationships with people have grown deeper and more intimate.

Question 21

The thanksgiving of those praying is multiplied. As more pray, more are privileged to participate in the process of seeing God at work and praising Him as a result.

Question 22

Just as the human body sends aid and cares for a wounded part, so the body of Christ should do the same, paying special attention to the suffering member of the church.

Question 23

The first is the cloud of witnesses, which refers back to those in Hebrews 11 who bore witness of the faithfulness of God (note the «therefore» that begins chapter 12). Their example should spur us on in our struggles. The second is Christ's example of suffering. The fact that He endured so much hostility and persecution (v. 3) should keep us from losing heart. See Hebrews 2:14-18 and 4:14-16 in this regard.

Question 24

He commands us to speak (proclaim) His message (implied: even in the midst of persecution) and to fear and respect God.

Question 25

They are essentially synonymous. To be humble is to lay aside one's "rights". It is impossible for a proud person to do this. He wants to hold on to everything he has. The humble person is willing to "let everything go". If we are truly humble, willing to put aside any "right", then we will be willing to face any affliction, even death on a cross, without becoming bitter.

Answers to exercises



Exercise 1

Your answer

Be ready to share it in your group.

Exercise 2

- a. Peter says we have been called to be patient and submissive like Christ when we do what is right and suffer for it.
- b. Peter probably introduces the example of Christ because He is the ultimate example of suffering unjustly. Jesus never committed one single act of sin in His life, and yet He was treated as if He were the most despicable sinner on earth. He also responded to this unfair treatment in love, humbly and quietly submitting Himself to it. He claimed no «rights» but trusted in God to bring about justice. We, in turn, are to «follow in His steps» and ask ourselves when suffering, How would Christ respond in this situation?
- c. Submission, especially in unjust circumstances, so goes against the grain of sinful human nature that people, deep down, know there is something attractively «different» about you. When you do not fight back and do not demand your «rights,» it becomes abundantly clear that you are not depending on your own strengths and abilities but upon something or Someone beyond yourself.

Submission will not always cause a positive response to the gospel. Though many will be won, there will also be those who, like Pharaoh, become more hardened to the gospel as they witness the «miracle» of your response. They probably will also become more fierce in their attacks as they are «unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit» with which you speak (see Acts 6:10ff).

Exercise 3

Your answer

Being a product of proven character, hope cannot be seen as wishful thinking (i.e., «I hope it is true, but I'm not sure»). Rather, hope, when used in the New Testament in connection with the Christian life, refers to something you are absolutely sure of and expect to happen (cf. Rom. 8:24-25; 1 Pet. 1:3-5, 13, 21; 3:15; 1 Jn. 3:3). In Romans 5:2 and 8:23-25 Paul uses «hope» to refer to our future glorious hope. So in 5:4-5 he apparently has the same thing in mind (note that the firstfruits of the Holy Spirit [8:23] are also alluded to in 5:5).

In James 1:4 the end result is maturity in all areas. This is probably equivalent to Paul's use of the term «proven character» in Romans 5:4. But James goes on in 1:12 to say that, once a man has «proven character» (same word again as in Rom. 5:4), he will certainly receive his future reward, which would correspond to Paul's concept of hope. So both Paul and James treat suffering and the resultant maturing process in basically the same way.

Exercise 4

Your answer

When our earthly parents discipline us, immediately afterwards, if they are good parents, they will verbally reassure us that they still love us. The only way God can do this is either through His Word and the inner witness of the Holy Spirit or through other believers. But often, when we are

hurting after being disciplined, we do not listen for His comforting voice and therefore erroneously conclude that He no longer loves us as much as He did before. Therefore, we constantly need to be in the Scripture and in touch with other mature believers so that, when we are disciplined, we will be able at the same time to hear God's voice reassuring us of His love.

Exercise 5

No doubt they recalled Jesus' flogging as well as the rest of His immeasurable suffering. For them to suffer even a little bit of what Christ suffered was seen to be a great privilege. It strengthened their identification with Him as His followers.

Exercise 6

Your answer.

Suffering: A Biblical Survey

The following biblical survey was given as resource material based on the book, *Joni*, by Joni Eareckson with Joe Musser, and was published by World Wide Pictures, Minneapolis, MN.

A. Biblical principles related to suffering. After each principle there are letters to indicate to whom it applies: G-general/B-believers/U-unbelievers.

1. Suffering cannot always be said to be caused by sin or to indicate lack of spirituality (1 Cor. 4:9-14; Jn. 9:1-3; 2 Corinthians 11:22-31). G
2. The source of suffering is linked with sin, evil, and the curse of God (Gen. 3:14-19; 1 Cor. 15:51-55; Rom. 8:20-23). G
3. Removal of suffering is linked with redemption (Gen. 3:21--c.f. context of curse prior to this verse) and the ultimate triumph of righteousness (2 Pet. 3:5-7, 10; Rev. 21:1, 4 and 22:2, 3). G
4. Suffering and evil occur in the broader context of God's providence (Gen. 50:20; Job 1:12; 2:6). It is not fate or bad luck. G
5. Suffering can be negative or positive, depending on how you respond (Gen. 50:20; book of Job). Satan wants to turn us aside 1 Pet. 5:8-9; God wants sufferings to strengthen us (Job). G
6. Suffering is to be anticipated in the light of God's character (1 Pet. 4:19; Job 23:10-13, 14; 1 Cor. 10:13; Isa. 55:9; Eccl. 11:5) so that we should not fall prey to despair (2 Cor. 4:8; Rom. 8:28-32, 37-39). G
7. Suffering indicates the vulnerability of our present state and the need for redemption (2 Cor. 5:1-5; Phil. 3:21). This points out that man's greatest need is not just salvation of the body, but of the soul which continues past the grave (1 Pet. 1:6, 9, 24). G
8. Suffering tests where our real point of hope is (1 Pet. 1:6, 13) and reveals the intent of our hearts (Job's wife, Job 2:9; Ps. 11:5, 17:1-5) because it makes us reflect on the real meaning of life (see the Psalms). G
9. Suffering is used to increase our awareness of the sustaining power of God and to whom we owe our sustenance (Ps. 68:19; 2 Cor. 12:9-10), and draws us closer to Him (Job 23:5, 7, 10), because He cares for us (1 Pet. 5:7). G
10. God uses suffering to gain the praises of men both good and evil (1 Pet. 1:6-7; Jn. 9:1-3, 11:4; Rev. 11:13). G

11. God uses suffering to refine, perfect, strengthen, and keep us from falling (Ps. 66:8-9; Heb. 2:10; 12:10). B
12. Suffering allows the life of Christ to be manifested in our mortal flesh (2 Cor. 4:7-11) bankrupting us, and making us dependent on God (2 Cor. 12:9; Ps. 14:6). B
13. Suffering teaches us humility (2 Cor. 12:7) imparting the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:1-11), for God is more concerned with character than comfort (Rom. 5:3,4; Heb. 12:10-11). Thus, the greatest good of the Christian life is not absence of pain but Christ-likeness (2 Cor. 4:8-10; Rom. 8:28-29). B
14. Suffering can be a chastisement from God for sin and rebellion (Ps. 107:17; Isa. 24:5-6; Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 11:29-30). G
15. Suffering is the only means in which moral evil enters into the consciousness of God (God--Isa. 63:9; Christ--Lk. 9:22, 17:25, 24:26, 46; Matt. 16:21; Heb. 2:10). G
16. Voluntary suffering is one way to demonstrate the love of God (2 Cor. 8:1, 2, 9). B
17. Obedience and self-control is [SIC] learned from suffering (Heb. 5:8) along with patience (Rom. 5:1-5) and refinement (James 1:2-8; Prov. 17:3), conforming us to His death (Phil. 3:10, 2:1-11). B
18. Suffering may be due to a failure of ourselves, or failure to employ our God-given resources in accord with wisdom (Prov. 19:16, 13:20, 11:24, 22:3, 27:12; Job 21). G
19. Temporary suffering may be due to those over us who are negligent (Num. 14:31-33), but on an ultimate basis we stand as individuals (Ezek. 18:10 and broad context). G
20. Suffering or pain is an indicator or deterrent to continual bodily harm (Ps. 139). G
21. Suffering is part of the righteousness man's struggle against sin (Heb. 12:4-13) and evil men (Ps. 27:12 and 37:14-15; 1 Pet. 2:18, 2 Tim. 3:1-13; Heb. 11:36-40). See-suffering for righteousness sake, 1 Pet. 3:14; for His sake, Phil. 1:29; for the kingdom of God, 2 Thess. 1:5, for the Gospel, 2 Tim. 2:9; for unjustness, 1 Pet. 2:19; as Christians, 1 Pet. 4:16; for the name, Acts 5:41. This indicates how the righteous become sharers in Christ's suffering (2 Cor. 1:5; 1 Pet. 4:13) as sons (1 Pet. 5:8; Heb. 11:36-38). B
22. Satan uses suffering to cast aspersion on the character of God and His saints (Job 1,2). G
23. Suffering serves as a preliminary warning of the judgment to come to unbelievers (Luke 16; Rev. 20:10-15; 2 Kings 15:5). U
24. Satan uses suffering as an obstacle to evangelizing (Eph. 6:16-20; 2 Tim. 4:1-8, 15-17; 2 Cor. 4:7-18). U
25. Endurance of suffering is given as a cause for reward (2 Cor. 4:17; 2 Tim. 2:12). B
26. Suffering demonstrates the total commitment to Christ that we need in all that we do or say (2 Cor. 4) and demonstrates the need for the grace of God to sustain us. B
27. Suffering forces community and the administration of our gifts for the common good (1 Pet. 4:12; 1 Cor. 12; Phil. 4:12-15). B
28. Suffering indicates that real faith can survive both calamity and prosperity (Job 42:7-17). B
29. Suffering teaches us that sustenance for our lives is not found totally in our physical life but in the inworking of God upon the heart. (Psa. 27) B
30. Suffering binds Christians together into a common or joint purpose (Rev. 1:9). B
31. Suffering produces discernment and knowledge and teaches us His statutes. (Ps. 119:66, 67, 71). B

32. Through suffering God is able to obtain a broken and contrite spirit which He desires (Ps. 51:16, 17; Ps. 32). G
33. Suffering causes us to gird our minds by making us fix our hope on the grace to be revealed at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:6, 13 and 2:5). G
34. Suffering can be used as a nullifier to the counsel of the nations and the frustration of their plans (Rev. 17, 18; Ps. 33:10). U
35. God uses suffering to humble us that He might exalt us at the proper time (1 Pet. 5:6, 7 and broad context). B
36. Suffering teaches us to number our days that we might present to God a heart of wisdom (Ps. 90:7-12). B
37. Because ultimate judgment is not yet final, current suffering must be viewed as a necessary complement to this life (1 Pet. 5:10; Phil. 3:20, 21). G
38. Suffering, as a complement to evil, will be the wages of the ungodly for their rebellion (2 Pet. 2:13 and 3:7). Therefore, suffering serves as a warning to the ungodly. U
39. Suffering is valuable to godliness when coupled with contentment (1 Tim. 6:6). B
40. Suffering is sometimes necessary to win the lost (2 Tim. 2:8-10 and 4:5, 6; 2 Cor. 1:1-11). B
41. Sufferings of the righteous strengthen and allow one to comfort those who are weak or are suffering (Phil. 1:12-14, 20 and 2:17; 2 Cor. 1:3-11 and 7:6, 7; Heb. 2:18). B
42. Suffering is only temporary and in light of its momentary affliction is nothing as compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ (Phil. 3:8). B
43. Since righteousness does not exempt us from suffering, this should teach us that there is a warfare going on, on a much higher plane, which, until complete, will allow suffering to continue. (see Job) G
44. God desires truth in our innermost being and one way He does it is through suffering (Ps. 51:6 and 119:17). B
45. The equity for suffering will be found in the next life (Ps. 58:10, 11; Lk. 16:19-31, esp. v.25; 1 Pet. 2:12). B
46. Suffering is always coupled with a greater source of grace (2 Tim. 1:7, 8 and 4:16-18; 1 Pet. 4:14; 2 Pet. 1:3; 1 Cor. 10:13). B
47. Suffering can lead to the repentance of sin (Ps. 32; 2 Cor. 7:5-11). G
48. Suffering teaches us as men that we are frail and weak, dependent for hope on someone greater (Ps. 14:6 and 11:1). G
49. Suffering of the righteous (vengeance) will be a main cause for the judgment of the wicked (Ps. 12:5; Rev. 6:9-11). U
50. Suffering teaches us to give thanks in times of sorrow (2 Cor. 1:11). B
51. Suffering increases faith (Abraham — Gen. 22; Ps. 46:10; Jer. 29:11). B
52. Suffering allows God to manifest His care (Ps. 56:8). B
53. Suffering stretches our hope (Job 13:14-15). B
54. When suffering seems to have no meaning in the physical realm it does have meaning in the spiritual realm (Job 1-3. Remember, Job knew not the cause or reason for his sufferings). G

55. Suffering is used to break the will of the rebellious (Rev. 11:13). Pain plants the flag of reality in the fortress of a rebel heart. C. S. Lewis, «God whispers in our pleasure but shouts in our pain.» U
56. When there is no answer for the suffering, it does not mean God has forgotten, only that resolution is destined for the life to come (Ps. 9:12, 18). G
57. Suffering indicates that true hope changes some, but does not obliterate it. G
58. Suffering is not cause for being ashamed (2 Tim. 1:12). B

B. The Principles Logically Applied

As one approaches the subject of suffering within the Scriptures, he finds that the complete «why» of suffering is never found. He must rather rest in the character of God (Deut. 29:29, Isa. 55:8, 9) and that all suffering takes place within the appointed boundaries of God. This does not mean that we are not to pursue the subject, only that we are to bow to the truth which God has given us, with the amount of explanation He has revealed.

As we enter the realm of suffering, we are immediately caught by a foundation principle that human suffering cannot be understood in a purely human or naturalistic context, but must encompass the heavenly counterpart, the spiritual realm. From the physical plane, man finds God trapped in inconsistency; how can a holy God allow evil and any complement of it? Here we must bow to mystery, but not to mystery without direction. For in the question of evil, which poses the greatest threat to God and His character, especially His holiness, we find that He has given us some guidelines to allow us to rest in His revealed character.

1. God's ultimate glory is found with His triumph over all evil and sin and any of its counterparts, such as suffering and wickedness (Rev. 21:1-5).
2. In His triumph, He reveals that suffering is intricately linked with Satan, evil, and the fall (death), and the curse of God upon the earth (Rev. 20:10-15, 21:1-5, 22:1-5; Gen. 3:14-19, 21; 2 Pet. 3:5-7, 10; 1 Cor. 15:51-55; Rom. 8:20-23).
3. He allows evil and suffering only to occur within the broad context of His providence, for God never relinquishes control of His omnipotent rule, which gives hope to those who suffer.
4. That with the entrance of sin and suffering, not all further suffering is due to immediate sin or wrongdoing or serves as an act of punishment, for in the book of Job, the dialogue in heaven has established Job's innocence before God (Job 1:7, 8).
5. This means that suffering is a natural counterpart to life within a fallen world. In the end, God will create a new heaven and earth where there are no tears, death, mourning, crying, or pain; for the first heaven and earth have passed away with the removal of all the ungodly, including Satan and his demon host, and upon the new heaven and earth we will find the godly.
6. This enlightens us as to five facts:
 - a. That God's ultimate justice transcends the earthly and temporal.
 - b. That God is using that which opposes His character to glorify Himself (Prov. 16:4).
 - c. That time, which allows for the existence of sin and evil, poses no threat to God's character as long as victory and equity are assured.
 - d. That the ultimate answer to suffering rests in the justice, wisdom, and knowledge of a transcendent God.
 - e. That suffering remains because mortality has not put on immortality (1 Cor. 15:51-55).

This means that suffering stands as a neutral test because two opposing personalities are using it for their own ends, one for good and one for evil.

Satan uses it to glorify himself by:

1. Impugning God's character
2. Opposing the saints
3. Hindering the work of redemption
4. Verifying his own power
5. Causing disunity--the contradiction to a harmonious God
6. Furthering his own kingdom
7. Nullifying sanctification

God uses it to glorify Himself by:

1. Using it as a warning device in the physical makeup of a man
2. Bringing joy out of despair
3. Building character in men
4. Breaking the will of the ungodly
5. Sanctifying the inner man
6. Judging sin with its own product
7. Eliminating it
8. Warning man of His ultimate judgment
9. Testing the character of faith in His saints
10. Foiling the counsel of the ungodly
11. Bringing the praise of the wicked in His day of visitation
12. Winning the lost
13. Imparting knowledge of Himself
14. Teaching man dependence on Him
15. Bringing reward
16. Giving us the knowledge of Christ
17. Teaching us to give thanks in all things
18. Disciplining His saints
19. Allowing us to experience more of God's comfort
20. Perceiving the outcome of wrong moral and natural choices

Man may face it by:

1. Wanting to remake the world
2. Anticipating it
3. Crying in self-pity
4. Rebelling against it
5. Resigning oneself to it
6. Looking for God in it
7. Waiting on God even if He's not perceived

Note: This is an adaptation of an article whose authorship is not certain but believed to be Steve Estes and Joni Eareckson Tada.

