

Bible Truths
Foundations of the Faith

Suffering:

*Where does it Fit
In God's Plan*

Iron Range Bible Church
Dedicated to the Systematic Exposition of the Word of God

Suffering: Where does it fit in God's Plan?

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Often the first thing that we think when faced with suffering in our life is, Why me? Why now? What is God doing? What we have seen in our studies of James and 1 Peter is that 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 God, but suffering requires the right response to the circumstances faced 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.

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. (NASB)

The following questions are designed to help us "**consider**" in the day of adversity: How am I responding to it? How should I respond to it? Am I learning from it? Does my response demonstrate faith, love for God and for others, Christ-like character, values, commitment, priorities, etc.? How can God use it in my life for His glory? 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 us in life.

In the design of God, it is also something to make us think. If we haven't figured it out yet spiritual critical thinking is a must in living the Christian life.

Suffering is a tool God uses to get our attention in order to accomplish His purposes in our lives in a way that would never occur without the trial or irritation.

"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 you office or your church, damaging your reputation, bringing you grief and anxiety." 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/minds 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 to get us back on track spiritually. "For those whom the Lord loves he disciplines, and he scourges every son He receives." (Heb. 12:6).
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 difficult. 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" = *lupeo* means "to cause pain, sorrow, grief").

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 sufficiency of God.

Suffering has as its chief purpose the formation of Christ-like character that we would be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:28-29).

Suffering Proves, Tests Us

The word "trials" in James 1:2 is the Greek *peirasmos* and refers to that which examines, tests, and proves the character or integrity of something. [with no indication of the outcome]

While "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 *dokimazō* which means, "put to the test," "prove by testing ." testing for approval after examination; passed the test by using the DOA's

Suffering is more often a process over time than it is a single event. "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, for the results God seeks to accomplish with the trials of life it requires time and thus also, endurance.

Suffering provides opportunity for God's glory, our transformation as we get our thinking focused, our testimony to become effective as we apply the truths of the Word to the suffering faced.

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

We must realize that suffering is inevitable while we are living in a sin cursed world. Peter points out in 1 Pet 1:6-7 related to suffering and tests in life "since it is necessary, you have been distressed by various trials,"

Paul in 1 Thes. 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 when they come?

Suffering is a Struggle

It's going to be a battle all the way. That's why they are called "trials" and "tests." 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 that is utilizing the resources given which leads to being complete lacking in nothing (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 mental attitude of joy and tranquility, we must also be able to look ahead to God's purposes and reasons for suffering. We must have an eternal perspective, that is to remember that momentary suffering, is producing an eternal weight of glory. (2 Cor. 4:17-18)

We must understand that 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 as a means 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.

Purposes and Reasons for Undeserved Suffering

- (1) We suffer as a testimony, as a witness:** (2 Tim 2:8-10; 1 Pet. 3:13-17). When believers handle suffering joyfully and with stability, being able to give thanks for the test whatever it might be, it becomes a tremendous testimony to the power and life of Christ that we claim. Suffering provides key opportunities to manifest and magnify the power of God through our lives 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).
- (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 the 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*." Will you trust Me?

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 working in us that produces faith and mature Christ-like character (Ps. 119:67, 71).

James 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 1:6-7: The key word is "the proof of our faith."
"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, by separating out the human viewpoint dross, and to bring truth to the surface, so we are able 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 motivate 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. 1:19-25). 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 motivate 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; Heb 12:5-11). This involves **known sin**, rebellion and indifference to God.

(b) **When in fellowship:** Suffering becomes the loving and skillful handy work of the Vine Dresser to make us more productive. (John 15:1-7).

Positive: when believers live under suffering joyfully (i.e., patiently enduring 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. 4:8-10; 3:18). This means trust, peace, joy, stability, biblical values, faithfulness and obedience in contrast to sinful mental attitudes, blaming, running from reality, complaining, and reactions against God and people.

(7) Our suffering manifests 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.

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