

The Gift of Suffering

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Suffering is a constant issue in the Church. It is also a constant issue between the Church and the world; the world uses suffering to prove God doesn't exist, or to declare his malicious character. For many of God's people it can be a daily issue that tears at their faith, siphoning off their energy and enthusiasm. It is too often a crippling and debilitating influence in our lives that can lead to bitterness and despair. For those whose suffering includes severe physical pain, it is a never-ending reminder that peace with God in our spirit may not include a commensurate amount of peace in our body. And so we make an uneasy friend of our pain, with no other benefit of friendship than its presence. We perhaps savor our pain, emotional as well as physical, like some badge of honor that we can parade before the world. We rehearse it, and prick at it to be sure it's still there as if confirming our own as well as the pain's existence.

We have those in the church who, with theological precision, remind us that God has given us this suffering and we just need to accept it as part of our faith. "Endure it," they tell us. There are others who rub salt in the wound with their smiling conviction that it's going to work out for the best. There are those who split eternity in two, telling us that Job was mistaken when he said that the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. They want it to read, "The Lord giveth, Satan taketh away." Suffering in their view is either punishment from God that we deserve, or oppression from the devil that we don't deserve and shouldn't put up with. And then there are the wiser brethren who simply sit down and suffer with us, with no commentary on the side. None of these is adequate counsel for how to handle suffering in a way that strengthens rather than diminishes our relationship with God.

We are not to simply endure suffering. We are not to ignore suffering. We are not to repress suffering. We are not to evade suffering. We are to embrace our suffering with joy, and with the conviction that it is a gift from God. It is a portal that we must pass through if we are to fully identify with Christ. And it is something that we need to bring before God in prayer, with thanksgiving and humility. Few of us can do that the first time we encounter personal suffering. It takes our breath away. It shatters our world and staggers us with grief. It may mean an irretrievable rather than a temporary loss, and thereby it isn't something we're going to get over in time. It takes a patient heart to wait out the lesson learned or benefit derived - if such a lesson or benefit is ever discovered at all. How do we thank God for taking our child's life, striking our spouse with cancer, or ending our life's work? The answer is simple, but it isn't easy. We cling to Christ alone and not to anyone or anything else. And we bear the grief in silence rather than under protest. "This happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God, who raises the dead." (2Cor.1:9)

When suffering enters our life, it is like being stripped naked on a public stage. It is a sudden and devastating invasion of privacy. We are catapulted from a sanctuary into a field of conflict. We all have an innate desire to fill our world with "me and mine," to draw our things and our family around us in a kind of insulated cocoon. We're warm and cozy by the fire while winter blows its cold wind somewhere outside. Conflict, despair, and suffering are things we'd prefer to happen to other people. We want to control the gates of our self-made havens, barring entrance to such unwelcome guests. God sometimes needs to storm those man-made gates. We

aren't supposed to be warm and cozy in front of the fire! What are we doing there? Who gave us permission to leave the field of battle?

In the movie, "The Quiet Man," Maureen O'hara's character is despondent over the fact that her brother has refused to release her dowry to her after her marriage. When John Wayne's character cannot understand the depth of her need, she says, "There are 300 years of dreaming in those things. They're *mine*, and I'll *have* them. Until I have my things about me, you have no part of me, *me*. Instead I'll remain the indentured servant I've always been with nothing to call my own." We often use our occupations, possessions and relationships to define who we are as people. And when they are taken from us, we lose ourselves with them, because we've been wearing the wrong identity. Sometimes God takes them from us to remind us who we already are. It isn't what or who is around us that defines who we are, but who is within us. If God chooses to take from us, it cannot affect who we are in His sight, and in reality. We are still His precious children. And He is still our precious Father.

Yet we insist on ascribing ulterior motives to His actions when they result in a loss to us. We react emotionally before our intellect has a chance to recover. We deny what has happened. We reject it as too bizarre to be true. We fly into a rage, demanding accountability. We ask, "Why me?" or "Why them?" as if asking God to justify Himself to us. And, if we know it isn't in God's nature to torment us, we want to exact vengeance on any earthly cause of our misfortune we can find, whether a drunk driver, an inept hospital nurse, or a street thug. Someone will pay for this injustice! I did nothing to deserve this! Can you hear Job's protest in this? Corrie ten Boom said to Chuck Swindoll that she had learned to hold lightly to things, so that it wouldn't hurt so much when God took them from her. What do we hold onto instead of Christ? Maybe the answer to that question is the reason we ask, "Why?" in the face of suffering.

"Why" is really the wrong question to ask. It is only asked when we want to assess blame. It seeks justification, and in the absence of justification, it seeks retribution. The "who" question is already settled in Scripture. God has brought us this suffering, either directly or indirectly. I'd like to suggest that when we encounter suffering in our life, instead of asking "why?" we need to ask, "To what end?" A number of years ago, there was a best-selling book titled, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" I had a pastor friend who wanted to write a rebuttal entitled, "Why do good things happen to bad people?" He was referring to our undeserved salvation. Scripture says that both things occur, and that God is the author of both. What does He have in mind as the result of this suffering? He is not a wanton destroyer, so there is a benefit to be found, even if it's a costly one.

I am not comforted when someone says we don't know why God does these things, or that we may never know why. That's just not true. We *do* know why, and we *can* accept our suffering gratefully from God's hand. We don't have to just accept our "fate" grudgingly, or go on blind faith that God will somehow make it up to us like some cosmic accounting mistake that He has to pay back. But don't expect to find such acceptance immediately. I heard one pastor say, tears streaming down his face, "It took me years to thank God for the death of my son." The understanding and acceptance were there, but the grief remained. Another lost a wife to cancer. He said, with a lump in his throat, "Time doesn't heal. God heals. It takes time." Joy and grief can coexist without any inconsistency.

Joy is a mental attitude, not an emotional state of being. It is a conscious choice we make. In James 1:2-3 we read, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance." To consider something nasty to be something good is a willful act, not a spontaneous emotional response. God considers us righteous for Christ's sake. We are not, but He considers us so. That is how we are to respond to suffering. It isn't pleasant, but we are to consider it as a joy or a benefit of sonship (Heb.12:7). That means we've got to understand it in the context of God's plan for our life. Joy is usually linked in Scripture to suffering and the perseverance of the saints. "Why do we need to persevere? We're saved. Isn't that enough?" Not by a long shot. Christ's joy was displayed by his scorn of the shame, abuse and pain he suffered in order to keep God's agenda. The agenda gave meaning to his sacrifice, so that the benefit was obvious.

If we're a soldier in time of war, we need to be convicted of the righteousness of our cause and the need for our side to win. If we're protecting our homeland and our families, it's pretty clear why we've got to put our lives on the line. If we're captured and tortured, we need to be convinced of the need to keep faith with our comrades. We need to remember the "benefit" of revealing nothing that would compromise them. That's the only way we can withstand the pain of our torture. In spiritual warfare, it isn't all that clear-cut for us when we're not under direct and intentional persecution for our faith. Where is this homeland? Who are these comrades? People are dying in their sins and trespasses, but we prefer to hold onto what we've already got. Why put it on the line sacrificially for some stranger's sake? That's a sad portrayal, but true. If we are to overcome that, we need to have a worldview instead of a parochial one. We need to see these people from an eternal perspective. We can't say to ourselves, "Well, they've got food, clothing and shelter. Salvation for them would be nice, but the cost for me is too high. I have too much to lose." That's when we know we're owned by our possessions. Our treasures are misplaced. As he was dying on cross, Christ spoke of paradise to the prisoner on his side. He never lost his eternal perspective, despite his circumstances and his pain.

Whether suffering comes by persecution or by happenstance, we're still in a war. Suffering is one of the battlefields on which the struggle between good and evil takes place. Christ broke us out of prison, and we've been conscripted into God's army. Our mission is to set the other prisoners free. If we don't believe that, and act on it, our whole life becomes a sham. How and where we wage war is based on our gifts, our past experiences, and our current circumstances; but waging the war is not optional. If we aren't motivated to grab our weapons and head into the field of battle, then we don't have any concept of who Christ is, or what he has done for us. In that war, the outcome is inevitable but so are the casualties.

During World War II a decorated hero who volunteered for hazardous duty was lied to about the location and strength of our troops. He was then sent into Germany, and compromised by his own people so that he would be captured. All of this was unknown to him. He broke under torture and revealed to his captors the lies that he'd been fed by his own people. Because of the immense pain he endured before breaking, his captors believed the lies to be true, and committed their own troops to the wrong location. That helped to win the war. It didn't help the soldier live with the memory of being broken, and divulging what he believed was secret information.

Does God treat us like cannon fodder in the same way? No. But it is just as important that when we suffer, we preserve the glory and honor of God by responding appropriately to the circumstances. How we respond is our testimonial to God, and a demonstration of our trust in Him. When Paul writes to the Philippians about the gift of suffering (1:29-30) he says that they are now going through the same struggle that he has had and continues to have. The struggle is not an internal struggle. It is not wrestling with God or trying to prepare ourselves for battle. It is itself the battle. The Greek word used for struggle describes an external, public arena in which a contest is taking place. We are very much in the Coliseum where the lions are waiting to eat our flesh. If we bear witness to Christ in a Christ-like way, we will become the first seeds of a revolution that will sweep secular Rome, overcome it, and then take the gospel to the entire world under Rome's banner. We must be ever aware of that arena. We find it in our schools and in our work places, in our government and our media. Our suffering is a rite of purification, purging the dross and strengthening the steel. God brings suffering to his warriors to prepare them for battle. But there is very real pain in this very real battle.

Here's the irony: only God can soothe our pain. Why should we seek comfort from the very one who brought us the suffering? Because we participate in God's plan in the world (2Pet.3-5,10). We have the mind of Christ, and that mind is united in purpose with God the Father. We both desire the same things, don't we? Ah, there's the rub. Do you find yourself asking, "What has taking my child's life got to do with winning souls to Christ?" or "What has my being raped got to do with God's will for my life?" Let's continue to look at suffering when it is not linked to evangelism, when we are not being persecuted for Christ's sake. Where is the blessing? Why should my suffering be any cause for joy? Or the more difficult question, How can my suffering be a cause for joy? How do I move from one state of mind to the other? How can I recognize the benefit to me, and to those around me, of my suffering?

In James 4:8-10 we are given a series of conditional promises. If we draw near to God, then He will come near to us. So one reason for suffering is to draw us to God. If we wash our hands, purify our hearts, and stop being double-minded about our relationship with Him, He will come near to us. If we grieve, mourn and wail, and change our laughter to mourning and our joy to gloom, He will come near to us. Why would I want to trade in my joy for gloom? What am I grieving, mourning and wailing about? Is it my earthly circumstances, or my spiritual condition? Is my sorrow Godly sorrow which leads to repentance without regret (2Cor. 7:10)? Or is my sorrow merely frustration that I didn't get my own way? Godly sorrow produces earnestness in our endeavors, an eagerness to acquit ourselves in God's sight, indignation that we should even be accused of failing to live up to our potential. We're alarmed that it might be true. We long to please God. We're concerned how to do that, and we're ready to see justice done. (2Cor.7:11)

When I consider Christ, and how far short of his expectations I fall, I ought to grieve, mourn and wail. I ought to despair and gnash my teeth. Suffering makes us choose between our agenda for ourselves, and Christ's agenda for us. Christ's agenda is one he knows will bring us closer to God. We are to progress from how we see ourselves, to how others see us, to how God sees us. We are to move from dependence on self, to dependence on others, to dependence on God. We are to get over our pride and pursue humility in the presence of God.

If we humble ourselves before the Lord, He will lift us up, as Christ was lifted up and exalted on the cross (Phil. 2:5-9). “And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast.” (1Pet. 5:6,10) “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (James 1:2-4) God's plan is to use our suffering to make us strong, firm, steadfast, persevering, mature, and complete. It is not to cripple or weaken us. We cannot acquire these gifts if we do not trust God.

I have painfully concluded that I often don't trust God. If something is going well, it seems He wants to take it away from me - perhaps to see if I love him more than whatever it is. He becomes a “taker” in my mind, a spoiler, a teaser, a selfish brute. That's a perverted view of him of course, but emotionally that's pretty much what I'm feeling. In the old hymn we are told, “Christian, love me more than these.” How would I behave if, like Abraham, God demanded of me the one thing I'd waited for all my life? And why does God make such a demand? How does He have the audacity to demand that one thing from anyone? His job is to provide for me in the way I want to be provided for, isn't it? Well, to be frank, NO, it is not. That is a god of my own making; it is not the God of Scripture. I insist on loving the creature and the creation instead of the Creator. God needs to constantly remind me of my right relationship with him, because I won't remind myself. And the reminder comes in the circumstances, and in the suffering.

We aren't asked to be happy about our circumstances or our suffering, but we are told to consciously consider the deeper joy that will result from it (2Cor.7:4). If we cannot express that joy emotionally, we must at least accept intellectually that God has our long-term good in mind. That long-term good is not based on our part in this world, but only on our part in the kingdom of God. And our part in the kingdom of God is to know God's mind, to glorify him in this world and the next, and to enjoy him forever. Anything not in pursuit of that purpose is stripped from us, and replaced with something that *is* in pursuit of that purpose.

Can all sorrow and suffering be used by God? What if I am doing everything God expects of me? What if I am serving Him and my fellow man, just as God prescribes for me to do? What need is there of suffering to draw me near to him? Is Satan punishing me behind God's back as punishment for being a child of God?

Suffering does not come from Satan independent of God's will. God is sovereign. Nothing takes place in this life without His knowledge or consent. However, suffering does not necessarily result from our own actions. In fact, suffering is often the result of someone else's sin which produces consequences that flow into our life. Philosophers call it a “secondary cause.” Suffering may be the result of natural disaster which flows from God's physical laws. Or it may be part of God's larger plan to punish or redeem a nation, and we are caught in the cross-fire. And when these things happen, it isn't the circumstance created by that sin or disaster that matters, as much as how we respond to it. It isn't the question of why it happened, or who caused it, as much as how God will use it for us, for the world, and for God's glory. You see, we need to ask the right questions before we can understand how to deal with our circumstances.

If God permitted our suffering, if He brought it to us, then by opposing it, rejecting it, and condemning it, we oppose, reject, and condemn God. By seeking vengeance against the sinner who brought us our suffering, we reject God's intent to bless us by it, and we reject God's right to exact His own vengeance come Judgment Day. Vengeance is something reserved by God, and for God. God and his State appointee may exact punishment, but we cannot. God has better things for us to do. He doesn't want us tainted by blood-lust. That doesn't mean we let sin run amuck in our society. But we deal with it in a reasoned and institutionalized fashion. We live by the rule of law instead of by the law of vendetta. Retribution sanctifies the law. Vengeance corrupts it.

This is all well and good for dealing with suffering in a general way, in an impersonal way as it regards others. But suffering is a very personal thing when it happens to us. Which of us could suffer what Job suffered and respond the way that Job responded? He affirmed that "the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord... and in all this Job did not sin." Why do we find it so hard to speak such an affirmation ourselves? Was Job a stronger person than we are today? Did God not give him the same emotional trauma with his suffering that we receive with ours? I think it's clear from Scripture that Job was every bit as vexed under his circumstances as we are under ours. He admitted God had the right, but he denied that God had the justification. He wanted his day in court to prove it. Yet he knew he couldn't win his case with God sitting as the judge. And so Job whined to his wife, and to his friends, until a man of God named Elihu rebuked him for his audacity.

Elihu declared that God doesn't make the world revolve around any individual's performance, good or bad. What does that mean? Doesn't God care about me, personally? Doesn't He want good things for me, personally? Doesn't He want to protect me from evil? Yes, He does want all those things for us. But more than He wants *good* things for us, He wants the *best* for us. He wants us to be like His son. He wants to have fellowship with us. He wants to enjoy eternity with us. He wants us to desire a relationship with Him more than anything else in the world. He wants us to be His friend in the same way that Abraham was His friend. And of Abraham, God demanded the life of his son, Isaac. Abraham did not withhold from God what He requested. And in return, God did not withhold from us His own son, so that we might know Him and enjoy Him forever.

Christ's death on the cross was a willing sacrifice of self for God's will. Christ begged to be relieved of the burden, but if not, then God's will be done. He gave up family, friends, home town, possessions, dignity, power, and control. And in the end, the only benefits he received for his obedience were punishment, isolation, humiliation, and death. He deserved none of these. He willingly laid down his life. He wasn't a victim, but a victor in doing so. He wasn't defeated, but triumphant.

Perhaps we don't see our role in God's scheme of things. Christ knew what his role was. I suspect we often doubt what ours is. In the day to day rush of life, we forget our call to service in God's kingdom. We know we've been saved, but we don't always know what to do next. We don't know how to act out our salvation in fear and trembling. We say we belong to Christ, but we continue to live out our lives plowing in the same fields we've always plowed. He bids us to

come and follow him. But like Philip, we ask, "Follow you where, Lord? How can we know the way if we don't know where you're going?" We know. We just don't like where it leads.

We mediate Christ to the world. We *are* Christ to the world. We hesitate to believe that. How, in all our sinfulness, can we be God's ambassadors? We *want* to link our suffering to how we perform as His ambassador. In doing so, we defeat God's intent for us. We fear that if the two are not linked, then we must be the victims of random acts of violence, or bad luck. How could the world *not* revolve around us? If you can accept this, to paraphrase Christ, we are the spirit of Job, just as John the Baptist was the spirit of Elijah. We're made of the same stuff. If we are not persecuted for Christ's sake, and we encounter suffering for no apparent reason, other than we were in the wrong place at the wrong time, then where is the meaning in our suffering?

Christ was not Christ until he died on the cross. Up to that point he only had the potential to be the anointed one. Until he fulfilled his role as Messiah, he had not purchased redemption for any of us, regardless of his good intentions to do so. In the same way, until we are face to face with our own trials and losses, we don't know what it is to be Christ to the world. In the midst of our own suffering, we must come to grips with being Christ to the world, and joining with Christ in that suffering.

The suffering we're talking about isn't just what comes as a direct result of our ministry, or as a result of the world's rejection of our gospel presentation. Rather, what displays Christ in us is our acceptance of, and response to, God's will in the circumstance,. How we respond to *undeserved* punishment is the essence of Christ for all the world to see. It is Satan who whispers in our ear telling us that we have no purpose in this circumstance, no benefit to reap, because it is not persecution for Christ's sake. That's a lie! We can suffer for Christ's glory any time, any place, in any circumstance. This need to suffer for Christ's sake only accentuates the fact that we have distinguished our religious activity from our everyday life. We want to be Sunday morning warriors at the church building, and then return to our cozy den by the start of the football game. And we want to stay in that cozy den until next Sunday, if then.

God makes no such distinction between secular and sacred life. He wants us to respond to every circumstance, good or bad, just like His son would respond. He gave us Christ's example specifically to enable us to do that. But we cling to the world for all its worth when we should be clinging to Christ. Let me say it another way. We are not distinguished from non-Christians by our circumstances. We all experience the same kinds of tragedies and triumphs in our life. We only become distinguished from them by our response to those circumstances, and by the reasons we have to celebrate despite our pain. That's the point at which Christ is preached to the world.

God does not bring us suffering to punish us - he uses our suffering to conform us to the image of Christ. God brings us circumstances for *choice*, not *compensation*. Suffering is a *gift* from God! Don't blame Him for it. It is the means by which He removes every barrier that exists between Him and us. "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him" (Ph.1:29) If that were not true, half the Bible wouldn't make sense. God would be a fickle tormentor, sometimes hating us and sometimes loving us. He would be a predatory god of war, and a whimsical god of mercy, treating his worshippers no differently than his enemies. He would be a manic depressive personality with sadistic tendencies. That's

not the picture of God that Scripture reveals. That's not someone we desire to be faithful to, because obviously that god would not be faithful to us.

But that is not our Creator. God sent his only son to die for our sins on the cross. He wants the best for us, and sometimes that means suffering so that we can become the people He designed us to be. That's to His glory and our benefit. Why then should we complain when our expectations aren't met, or when He takes what we cherish? ***If we keep the eternal always in our sight, we won't hold onto the things of this world so tightly.*** Some of those things can be loved ones, our hopes and dreams for the future, our possessions, or our sinful desire for fame, fortune, power and pleasure. ***Be pure in heart: want the right things for the right reasons.*** Then we can embrace *whatever* God brings our way, even death. Grief may overtake us, but hope will never leave us, because God will never leave us. His promises and His love are forever.

We must resolve to live for Christ, and not for ourselves. If what we do is for Christ, we will receive the blessings that accompany suffering, and the joy as well. But if it is for self, then we can reap no benefit, and experience no joy, to compensate for our suffering. Therefore we must *strive* to be pure of heart and single-minded in purpose. We must also forgive ourselves when we fail to be so. We need set aside any doubts we may have about our motives. Paul writes, "What does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this, I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice..." (Ph.1:18). If we do the right *actions*, and we let God worry about our *motives*, then if suffering accompanies the actions, or it just happens, the joy *will* follow. That's because we have been faithful to our calling and to God's will for our life. His will is that we know Him, and that we be conformed to the image of His son. Suffering is the means by which He does both.

Twila Paris wrote a song called, "This Thorn" in which she describes the benefits of suffering as Paul suffered with his thorn in the flesh. Notice the benefits, and the motives, that she ascribes to God, the joining with Christ that suffering brings:

Thank you for this thorn embedded in my flesh,
I can feel the mystery, my spirit is made fresh,
You are sovereign still and forever wise,
I can see the miracle opening my eyes

to a proud heart so quick to judge,
laying down crosses and carrying grudges,
The veil has been torn, and I thank you for this thorn.

Thank you for this thorn, fellowship of pain,
teaching me to know you more, never to complain,
Thank you for this love planted in my side,
faithful, patient miracle, opening my eyes.

I never thought I'd say it without reservation,
But I'm truly grateful for this piercing revelation,

Of a proud heart so quick to judge
Laying down crosses, and carrying grudges
The veil has been torn, and I thank you for this thorn.

And if You chose to take it, I will praise You,
And thank You for the healing in Your name,
But if it must remain, I thank you for your rod,
Evidence of Father-love for a child of God

I join you in the sorrow,
So much less than you have borne,
And I thank you, really thank you,
Lord I thank you, I thank you for this thorn.

Suffering is part of the molding and shaping that conforms us to the image of Christ. God needs to break up the clay to rework it. Breaking it up is a painful process. What must hold me in its vise, is the sure knowledge that God is trustworthy, and that I will benefit. He is sanctifying me through the work of the Holy Spirit, and the cleansing of his word. Through Scripture, I am confronted with the truth of who God is, and the truth of who I am. Through Scripture, I acquire the mind of God, the eternal perspective of God, the encouragement of all those who have gone before me in the service of God, and the discerning wisdom I need to live a godly life, which is pleasing to my Creator and beneficial to my fellow man. I must humble myself or God will humble me beneath his mighty hand. I choose each day the path I will take. There is no middle road to take, no middle ground to stand on. I am either in the service of God or Satan. Suffering is designed to draw me to God, not drive me to Satan.

I need to constantly remind myself of who I was before Christ. I need to remember what God has done *for* me, not what he has done *to* me. I need to consider my ways and forget about what I think will bring me fame, fortune, power or pleasure, even within the bounds of the church. Paul said he considered such things “dung.” I need God to chastise me and love me in a way that in the moment seems brutal, but in the end brings joy. And that joy will surely come. It will come from knowing that God loved me enough to hold me fast, to drive me to a place of safety with his rod, and to provide a place for me in his kingdom. All that I am and all that I will be comes from God. If he chooses to remove some things from me, what can he take from me that he didn't give to me in the first place? How can I complain? Why would I want to? If my heart is right, if my mind is focused on him, I cannot. Therefore pray to have the mind of Christ; humble yourself before God; fear him and obey his commands. This is what life is for. May we live life accordingly.

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