

Why Would A Good GOD Allow Suffering?

Job 10:1-10

By Pastor Eddie Ildefonso

It's an old question. Four thousand years ago, a victim of personal, family, and financial reversals spoke to the silent heavens and pleaded, **"Show me why You contend with me. Does it seem good to You that You should oppress, that You should despise the work of Your hands?" (Job 10:2-3).**

The questions are still being asked. "Does God hate me? Is this why He is allowing me to suffer like this? Why me and not others?"

There are answers. Not exhaustive, but enough to keep our pain in perspective. Enough to show us how to put suffering to work for us. The following words will show us that while heaven may not be answering all of our questions, it is giving us all the answers we need to trust and love the One who, in our pain, is calling us to Himself.



Five Myths About Suffering **See your pain from God's perspective.**

Recently, I was reading an article in the Los Angeles Times (it was a cut out article with no date or author identified) that really grabbed my attention about the issue of suffering. I'm going to quote just two paragraphs because it led me down another path.

"Your blood pressure is fine," said the nurse, leaving me to wait for the doctor. "Oh, Lord," I prayed, "please help the doctor find out what is wrong with my body." After leaving numerous doctors' offices with no answers over the course of 18 months, I was desperately seeking a cure for the mysterious virus that often confined me to home and bed. I longed to reclaim my active lifestyle, resume working full time, and eventually return to the mission field. "Hello, Stacey," the doctor's voice interrupted my thoughts. "How are you feeling?" As I began describing my symptoms, she nodded as if already suspecting the answer. When lab results confirmed her diagnosis, my hope of simply "getting over it" vanished, leaving me to live with the daily limitations of an incurable disease. As a previously energetic and ambitious 27 year old, I watched in fear as this illness crept into every area of my life, threatening my work, my ministry, my finances, my dreams, my relationship with the man I loved, and even my walk with God. I cried out to Him, groping to know His presence in the midst of my pain."

The article went on to talk about a number of secular responses to our suffering. However, as I meditated on the article I began to think about suffering from a completely different perspective. God's perspective. See your pain from God's perspective.

Suffering. Just hearing that word can make us cringe. Under the influence of a society that abhors even the thought of suffering, we seek to escape the reality of pain in our lives any way we can--- television, busyness, entertainment, drugs. **Suffering doesn't fit with the world's notion of success or with the theology of God's goodness and victorious living in Christ we often espouse.** Never mind that Jesus often spoke about suffering. Like Peter and the disciples to whom Christ revealed His imminent suffering and death, we, too, are tempted to respond, "Oh, that will never happen to you!" *"Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee."* (Matthew 16:22). (v.21-28)

There are numerous myths about suffering within the church of the living God. I want to speak about five of those myths.

Myth 1-Suffering is negative and to be avoided at all costs.

I really wonder how often do we pray to know Christ better? Quite often, most of us would say. How often do we pray to know Him better through suffering? If you are like me, seldom, if ever! Shortly after a diagnosis a number of years ago, I read Paul's words in **Phil 3:10** *"That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death;"* I passionately prayed, "Yes, Lord, I want to know You better!" But as I came to the words that followed-----"and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings"---my tongue froze. The idea of praying for suffering made me shudder! Why would Paul pray for fellowship in Christ's sufferings? **I began to wonder if he knew something we unknowingly miss in our rush to avoid or "get through" suffering.**

Scripture clearly teaches that affliction and tribulation work to make us complete and mature. James wrote, **James 1:2-4** *"My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; [3] Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. [4] But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing."*

For the believer, suffering works on the seeds of faith in the same way manure works as a fertilizer. We abhor the stench of manure and, similarly, the agony of pain. Yet though it seems like waste material, suffering nourishes and feeds the growing fruits of faith and maturity in the garden of our lives. God does not waste any experience in our lives when we willingly surrender it to Him. Even Jesus, although He was God's Son, learned obedience from the things He suffered. **Hebrews 5:8** *"Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered."*

Myth 2---We can only have joy and peace when we are not experiencing pain.

Knowing that suffering develops character only partially comforted me at times. Though I tried to *"consider it pure joy"* as James advised, my emotions often swayed from peace to anxiety when my body battled unpredictable symptoms. How could I experience joy when I was losing my health, my independence, my dreams of returning to the mission field, and a love relationship?

The psalmist wrote: **“Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him” (Ps. 126:5-6).** When God gave me the seeds of sadness and brokenness, I wanted to cast them aside and implore Him to give me seeds of joy and peace instead. But then it struck me that joy and peace are fruit of the Spirit (**Gal. 5:22-23**), fruit which is often mysteriously born from seeds of suffering. Only as we willingly accept these uncomely seeds and allow Him to sow them in our lives will the lasting fruit of joy and peace bloom.

In 1873, Horatio Spafford, a prominent American businessman, waved good bye to his wife and four daughters as they boarded a ship for Europe, where he was soon to join them. Days later, he received the shattering news that the ship had collided with another, and his four daughters had drowned in the Atlantic. Journeying to Europe to meet his wife, his ship sailed over the waters where his daughters had perished. As his tears poured forth, he returned to his cabin, committed his immense sorrow to God, and wrote the following: **“When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say: It is well. It is well with my soul.”**

Not only did he experience God's peace for himself, but with the seeds of his suffering, he sowed a five, stanza hymn that has brought comfort and peace to countless people in pain for more than a century.

Truth: Suffering and sorrow, when willingly accepted, become the seeds of joy and peace in our lives.

Myth 3----Suffering is a sign of God's displeasure or judgment.

As months passed and God did not answer the many prayers of friends and family for my healing, I began to wonder, *Did I do something to invite this? Is this a sign of God's judgment of me?* Then the enemy, prowling about for an opportunity to attack when my spirit and body had grown weary, tempted me to believe that God had condemned me or, at best, overlooked me. Yet turning again to Scripture, I found truth in Paul's words: **“For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Phil. 1:29, NASB).**

Rather than a sign of God's disapproval or neglect, adversity is a sign of God's work in our lives. My pastor once said, “In God's economy, sometimes the measure of our hurt is the measure of our success.” Why? Because suffering makes us more like the Author of our salvation. Allowing us to suffer is actually a sign of His grace! He cares so deeply for us that He will do whatever is necessary for us to know Him better and to become more like Him. God does not test us, as the enemy would have us believe, simply to see how much we can stand. Earlier in this century, an anonymous writer penned these words:

“The very fact of trial proves that there is something in us very precious to our Lord; else He would not spend so much pains and time on us. Christ would not test us if He did not see the precious ore of faith mingled in the rocky matrix of our nature; and it is to bring this out into purity and beauty that He forces us through the fiery ordeal.”

Truth: *Affliction allowed by God is a sign of His grace in our lives and His love for us.*

Myth 4---Only voluntary suffering "for the sake of Christ" has spiritual value in the kingdom of God.

To sustain my spirit during the most difficult times, I meditated on Scripture about tribulation and claimed the promises and hope they offered. Initially, I found comfort in Peter's words:

"Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: [13] But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy." 1 Peter 4:12-13

However, the enemy soon began tempting me with thoughts such as, These verses don't apply to you! They are for those who suffer voluntarily for the sake of the gospel. Your affliction just happened: it isn't a result of your obedience to God. As I read **verse 14**---"*If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified.*" ---I had to concur that I was not being reviled for the sake of Christ. Perhaps the deceiver was right, and my affliction lacked real spiritual value.

Yet one night as I anguished over the apparent lack of purpose in my hardships, I stumbled upon a statement in C.S. Lewis's *Letters to an American Lady* that challenged my narrow definition of suffering for Christ. Responding to a letter from a woman who laments about her many ailments and trials (from toothaches to budget problems), Lewis wrote: "Always remember that poverty and every other ill, *lovingly accepted*, has all the spiritual value of voluntary poverty or penance" (*emphasis mine*). What comfort these simple words brought!

As I committed my illness to God and asked Him to accomplish His will through it, my struggles no longer seemed in vain. Thomas á Kempis wrote: "Do not despair or be discouraged but accept God's will calmly, bearing all that befalls you for the glory of Christ." My disease, as frustrating and limiting as it was, could still be used for God's glory.

Truth: *All suffering can be used for God's glory when we willingly accept and surrender our hardships to Him.*

Myth 5---If God were truly good, He would remove this suffering from me.

As another year ended, I prayed once again, "Lord, may this new year be one of healing." Even knowing the maturing benefits of affliction, I grew weary of the struggles. "Enough, Lord!" I wanted to say. "Haven't I been pruned enough for a while?" How desperately I longed for Him to deliver me from the trials and bring restoration of the losses I had endured. If God was God, He could do that, right? If He were loving, He would do that, right? How tempted I was to believe that if God truly cared about me, if He were all powerful, He would take away the pain.

Yet as I continued praying, I stumbled upon a treasure I would have easily **missed** had I looked to healing as the only sign of His love. More often than not, God does not remove our suffering. He does something better: He enters into our suffering. The Lord Jesus enters into the fullness of our pain and bears it with us. **“He is the God who is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Ps. 34:18).**

I finally understood why Paul prayed to know Christ and the fellowship of His sufferings. The path upon which we come to know Him better winds through the valley of suffering. If we seek a detour around the valley, we forfeit a chance to walk alongside the Suffering Servant. To know Christ more intimately, to more fully identify with Him, I must share in His sufferings by experiencing it myself. Whatever the nature of our affliction, sharing our pain with Him forges a deeper bond of intimacy. Nothing----not healing, not restoration, not success----compares with the comfort and sweetness of this fellowship.

The jewels of suffering abound: maturing faith, growing obedience, and increased fruit. Yet the greatest treasure I have found is deepened intimacy with Christ as I fellowship with Him in the midst of my suffering.

Truth: Suffering *helps* us identify with *the* Lord Jesus more fully and deepens our intimacy with Him.

The Mythmaker

Where do these myths originate? I believe they come from none other than the father of lies. The tempter has thoroughly duped us into believing that suffering is negative, a sign of God's neglect or of our own failure. Why would Satan be so determined to tempt us to avoid suffering (and sadly, sometimes to avoid those we know who are suffering)? Because he knows that suffering is one of the greatest means to draw us closer to Jesus and teach us increasing dependence upon Him. Thus, he will do whatever it takes to entice us to run from it until God, in His grace, allows suffering from which we cannot run.

When Peter refused to accept Jesus' imminent suffering and death, He responded, **“Get behind me, Satan” (Mt. 16:23).** In the midst of our pain, we must refuse to accept Satan's lies about suffering. When we believe that God loves us perfectly and that **“perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18),** we need no longer submit to the fear of suffering.

We live in a fallen world where the prince of darkness rules. Trials, hardships, and adversity are more normal in the life than abnormal. If this life were absent of suffering, we might begin to mistake it for the real thing. Suffering makes us hunger for heaven, our real home, where God will wipe away every tear. Though we may never fully understand our suffering we can rest in the hope that **“our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).**