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Biblical Suffering

Suffering that is Undeserved

Lesson 11

SUFFERING TO DEVELOP FAITH

James 1:2-8

Every Christian, when going through the pain and heartache of suffering, says to himself and sometimes to others in frustration, “If God really loves me, why am I suffering so? I’m His child and I should be free from suffering!” Then in anger he says, “If God is all-powerful, why doesn’t He use His power to get me out of suffering? After all, if He really cares, He would do something immediately!” These are the deep cries of a suffering Christian.

Yet behind these painful questions really lies a deeper theological question about God. Behind these cries of doubting, one is saying to himself, “God either has the power to help me but doesn’t care,” or “He cares about me but doesn’t have the power to do anything about it.” Either way this is a wrong or twisted or perverted view of God. There is only one true God and that is the God of the Bible.

All Christians, including myself, have brought a lot of sin and hurt into our Christian experience, which was part of our previous unsaved thinking about life. This includes our thinking about God. We may have viewed Him as a good and yet impersonal force, or an old grandfather with a long beard playing a harp on a cloud, who is totally distant from men, or a big tough guy in the sky who desires His way and wants to get even with men. The most common view in the so-called Christian country of the USA, is that God is a big ball of love who would not hurt anyone, loves everyone and wants all people to be happy, but He can’t do this because man won’t let Him.

These false concepts of God have seriously affected our thinking today as evangelical Christians who believe it is God’s will to make all men happy, and God must do this since He is a God of love. This thinking has resulted in the modern “Health, Wealth, and Prosperity Gospel” of our day. It essentially says God exists to serve man and to do the selfish desires of man. God, they say, wants all men to be healthy and will heal all men of their sicknesses if they just believe enough. God, they say, also wants all men to be wealthy and they can be rich if they just obey God’s commands and exercise enough faith. For them, it is God’s will that all Christians should prosper in all ways and the only reason they don’t is they don’t have enough faith.

If God desires, wants and promises perfect health on the basis of faith, as the “Prosperity Gospel” advocates claim, then all suffering a Christian is undergoing is either the result of some sin a Christian has done or is doing, or it is the result of Satanic or demonic influences. I would not deny some suffering is the result of disobedience on the part of the Christian. Also some suffering is the result of Satanic and demonic activity. In both of these cases, the Christian needs to seek deliverance from God.

However, the real problem with the “Health and Wealth Gospel” is that it is based on a false concept of God. It teaches a God which has nothing to do with pain and suffering. In fact, they say that pain and suffering are not part of the will of God for any man. What this philosophy does is detach God from all misery, suffering, pain and tragedy in the world. Consequently, all the bad things seem to be out of God’s control and when it comes to pain, suffering and tragedy, we are part of a world with God wringing His hands in heaven not knowing how to deal with suffering which is out of His control.

Now is this what the Bible teaches about God? Absolutely not! The Bible teaches a God who somehow takes responsibility for pain, suffering and tragedy so that while He is grieved with it, He does have control over it and somehow there is a divine design behind suffering. Let’s take a look at a few verses, (there are many), which teach God has direct or indirect control over suffering.

Exodus 4:10-11: *“Moses said to the LORD, ‘O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.’” The LORD said to him, ‘Who gave man his mouth? who makes him deaf or dumb? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, The LORD?’”* In these verses, God takes the ultimate responsibility for the deaf, dumb and blind. Yes, a loving God does this for His own glory. It is His sovereign will!

Ecclesiastes 7:4: *“When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other.”* God takes the responsibility for the good times and bad times man experiences. Yes, a merciful God does this for His own glory. It is His sovereign will!

Isaiah 45:5-7: ***“I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God . . . I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness. I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.”*** These were words given by God to that wicked Gentile King Cyrus. They were given to him so he would know who God really is. These verses say God creates darkness and disaster, taking full responsibility for them. Yes, a gracious God does this for His own glory! It is His sovereign will!

1 Samuel 2:6-8: ***“The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor.”*** This was the prayer of a woman named Hannah who knew her God. She realized the awesome power and might of the God of heaven and earth. She understood that God brings death and life, poverty and wealth and humbles and exalts men. Yes, a caring God does this for his own glory. It is His sovereign will!

Does this concept of God controlling pain, suffering and tragedy shock you? Does it seem mean and offensive to you? This is the God of Scripture! There is no other God! Some scholars have tried to escape this harsh side of God by saying that in the Old Testament the concept of God is one of harshness and wrath, but in the New Testament it is one of love and caring. No never! There is one God in both the Old and New Testaments and His character never changes. He is a sovereign God who has all things under control and He always does everything right, even though we might not understand it that way at the time. It is this God we must fall before in worship, calling Him Sovereign God and Loving Lord.

Rest assured, the God of the Bible, the only God, has both the power to remove our suffering and the love to comfort us in our suffering. However, He does not always remove our suffering because He has higher plans for us. Many times He uses our suffering for His own glory and to develop our faith. Remember, God takes responsibility for suffering. He either directly brings it or He allows it; that is, He uses the natural suffering which comes to all men to build Christian character and Christ-likeness in us. However, God always has control over suffering. He can remove it and many times does, but He does not have to remove it and many times does not for His own glory and for our own good. ***“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”*** (Rom 8:28).

SUFFERING TO TEACH PATIENCE ***“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.”*** (James 1: 2-3).

Suffering comes to teach the Christian to rest in God and to wait upon Him. Without suffering, we would not learn patience and perseverance in the Christian life.

One of the most difficult things a Christian must learn is to wait on God. We want God to do things yesterday and bring about our plans instead of His. ***“Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.”*** (Psa. 27:14). ***“But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary . . . they will walk and not be faint.”*** (Isa. 40:31).

SUFFERING TO TEACH HUMILITY AND GOD’S SUFFICIENCY ***“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.”*** (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

Paul had to learn that God’s grace is sufficient in every crisis and that God’s power flows through those who are weak and depend upon God for strength.

The Apostle Paul asked the Lord three times to take away his physical illness. This illness was probably an eye disease. God, however, did not desire to remove this illness from Paul because He had many lessons to teach Paul through this suffering.

SUFFERING TO PRODUCE MATURITY ***“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”*** (1 Pet. 5:10).

God uses suffering not only to humble a Christian but to bring him to maturity. The Christian who has suffered much and who has a divine viewpoint towards suffering, is the Christian who has matured spiritually in his Christian life.

Maturity only comes through knowledge of the Bible and graduation from the “school of difficulties.” Those Christians who have a PhD in suffering are those who have suffered much and applied their beliefs in God to their situation, maintaining a divine attitude about life.

While reading a biography of John Calvin I was impressed with the great Reformer’s ability to serve Christ when afflicted with great suffering. All three of his children died before they reached age one and his wife died after nine years of happy marriage. But Calvin also had many illnesses. He was tormented by constant headaches so that he could not sleep. He was subjected to infection of the trachea so that he would spit blood when he had used his voice too much in the pulpit. Several severe attacks of pleurisy prepared the way for consumption disease. Constantly he suffered from hemorrhoids, the pains of which were unbearably increased by an internal abscess that would not heal. He was the victim of frequent fever. He was plagued by gallstones and kidney stones in addition to stomach cramps and wicked intestinal influenza. To all this there was finally added arthritis. Calvin said in one of his letters, “If only my condition were not a constant death struggle.” With all this sickness, he preached and taught twice a day, wrote many books, carried on constant correspondence, and maintained his pastoral duties and administrative responsibilities in Geneva. God used suffering to make Calvin God’s man for the hour and to bring him humility and maturity. On his death bed, Calvin still worked and in his anguish and pain would whisper, “O Lord, how long?” Men begged him to rest. He shook his head and said, “I am still working. Bear with me that God will find me watching and busy at His work unto my last sigh . . .”

PRACTICAL BENEFITS TO SUFFERING

Suffering Causes One to Think About Death. Suffering is designed by God to remind us of death. Sickness and crisis are permitted by God so we will remember this world will one day be taken from us. Death is a reality and Christians are not to live this life as if they were never going to die physically. Death for the Christian is a glorious event and we are to face it with reality and look forward to it.

God uses suffering to tell us not to get so wrapped up in this world. We are not to plan and scheme for the future as if this life was the end of it all. God wants to remind us as we live a plush, easy, materialistic life that this is not heaven. We long for heaven, not this world. Suffering simply reminds us that we have only a few short years to serve Christ on this earth and we better make the most of our time and opportunities.

Suffering Causes One to Think Seriously about God. Suffering causes us to think seriously about God, our souls and the world to come. We would have very few thoughts about eternity if we did not suffer in time.

“Then again suffering reveals our essential weakness and casts us upon God. When a man is healthy and strong, with his family intact and his business secure, it is fatally easy to feel that he has a life under control. But when he is reduced to a wheel chair, when death enters the home or when his business crashes in ruins, he discovers how fragile he really is and how fragile is the whole structure of human life. But it is also in the hour of weakness that the Christian discovers how much he is cast upon God’s mercy.” (Herman Carson, *The Purpose of Suffering*).

Suffering Enables One to Comfort Others. Suffering helps us to understand others when they are going through the same suffering or suffering in general. It is impossible to feel another’s pain unless you have felt pain yourself. God permits Christians to suffer so they can comfort others and effectively minister to them. **“God . . . who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.”** (2 Cor. 1:4).

Recently I heard of a pastor who had given counseling and words of encouragement to many Christian parents whose unmarried daughters had become pregnant. He was confident he gave good counsel. But then one day his daughter reported to him that she was pregnant. The

pastor said that all advice, counsel and encouragement he gave to all those he had ever counseled in this situation did not help him. What did he learn? He learned not just how to sympathize but now he could show compassion. Maybe now he will just sit down and cry with Christian parents whose kids do dumb things!