

How God Uses Suffering in the Life of the Christian (points and explanations taken from Brian Hedges, *Christ Formed in You*) (2nd version preached on 12-17-2023)

Let me ask, “*What good is suffering?*” When you think of the trials and tests of this life, and someone, say a non-Christian were to ask you, “*What good is suffering?*” How would you answer? This would be difficult, if not impossible, to give an acceptable answer, outside of the grace of God. To the unbelieving world, this topic is most perplexing. For they reason, “*if God is good, then why all the evil and suffering in the world?*” (theodicy). And, even for the Christian, this SAME thought may come to mind, and you really have no answer. I think our Christian culture has great difficulty answering this question, and receiving what I will preach today. We are accustomed to a comfort-oriented materialism that urges painless, trouble-free living. The “prosperity” gospel has greatly influenced our understanding of suffering. Many believe “*because they are ‘God’s children’ He will shield them from major troubles.*” (Packer, Introduction, p. 16 *The Crook in the Lot*). Well, if you believe this, how is that going for you? Well, I must say, “*This way of thinking is empty. It is not biblical. And, it will certainly not help you in this very short life, which is full of troubles!*” So, today’s sermon is aimed at Christians. I hope it will be very helpful to you as you suffer in this life. And, I also believe, we will be better equipped to give an answer to unbelievers, about the great hope we have in Christ. **“For we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose”** (Rom. 8:28). Today, I have 6 ways God uses suffering in the life of the believer.

1. God Uses Suffering to Teach Us His Word. Richard Baxter said, “*Though the word and Spirit do the main work, yet suffering unbolts the door of the heart, that the word hath easier entrance.*” Thomas Watson called affliction our “preacher and tutor,” and said, “*A sick-bed often teaches more than a sermon.*”

Suffering and afflictions have a way of making the Scripture real and have more meaning. Psalm 119:67: “**Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word.**” Psalm 119:71: “**It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.**” Psalm 119:75: “**I know, O LORD, that your rules are righteous, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.**”

For those who are young in the faith, or just young in age, this truth may not resound with you as much as it does for those who are older as the trials of life have come your way. It has been my experience, especially as I speak with those who are older and have experienced many trials, that they can especially say this is true. Think about it. God’s will for our life is sanctification, that we might grow in godliness and be more like Christ. And we do this mainly through prayer and reading, understanding, applying, the Word of God. And if it takes suffering for us to grow in Christ, as we learn from his Word, then God is good in his purpose for us in suffering.

2. God Uses Suffering to Wean Us from Idols. What is an idol? It is anything we put in the place of God. It is false worship. And we are all worshippers. If we are honest with ourselves, we are many times all too happy with the things of this world and the desires that accompany those things. And the more we focus on the things of this world, the more we are satisfied in God’s gifts more than we are satisfied in Him, the more idolatrous we become. But God uses trials to

wean our hearts from idols, other sources of hope, so that we might set our hearts on Him and his Word.

In this regard, for the Christian, life is one big weaning process. As a mother slowly weans her young child from milk over to solid food, so God weans us from our sinful desires. And one of the ways God weans us is through suffering. When trials come like the death of a spouse or a loved one, or a sickness that takes our physical abilities, or when we do what is right as a Christian and suffer persecution, etc., God uses these times to teach us not to rely upon our own strength and our old idols, but to trust in Him. Tim Chester says this, **“Sinful desire can lurk in our hearts unnoticed because those desires are neither threatened nor thwarted. But suffering stirs the calm waters of latent sinful desires. It reveals the true state of our hearts. It’s God’s diagnostic tool, preparing the way of the medicine of gospel truth.”**

Suffering has a way of turning over the rocks of our heart where idols lay. And when this happens, the Gospel of Christ becomes sweet. I think of the rich young ruler. Jesus said, **“Go and sell what you have, give to the poor and follow me”** (Mark 10). Jesus directed this test right at the idol of his heart. In every trial of life is initiating an exchange. God puts out his hand takes some earthly thing from us. And he expects us to take our hand and take something heavenly from him. Do you remember David Brainerd who ministered among the native American Indians in severe conditions? While dying of tuberculosis, he wrote that, **“Such fatigues and hardship as these serve to wean more from the earth; and, I trust, will make heaven the sweeter.”** “Without suffering, our hearts are easily divided between God and the world, like a needle being pulled by two magnets. God sometimes removes the magnet of earthly comforts, so that our whole heart may be drawn to him.”

3. God Uses Suffering to Discipline Us. Heb. 12:5-11 says, **“And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” ⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”**

Now, we must remember, discipline is not punishment. GOD DOES NOT PUNISH HIS CHILDREN! Why? He punished his Son . . . in our place. And He accepted the sacrifice of his Son . . . in our place. This is the death of Christ. This is why we can say, **“Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”** (Rom. 8:1). Or in Ps. 103:10-13 we read: **“He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. ¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our**

transgressions from us. ¹³ **As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.**” Punishment is what the world will receive. God’s children are disciplined. Remember, God is making us holy. The word “discipline” comes from the same root word as make “disciples.” We might say, “God is making a disciple of us.” And in this process, we find suffering, and this from the hand of a loving Father. God knows what is best. Thomas Watson said, “*God’s rod is a pencil to draw Christ’s image more lively on us.*”

4. God Uses Suffering to Test and Purify Our Faith. Through suffering, He reveals the genuineness of faith—or the lack of faith. 1 Peter 1:3-7 says, “**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith-- more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire-- may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.**”

This is so hard, but the truth. The reality of your faith is revealed when you rejoice in your imperishable, undefiled, and unfading future inheritance; even though you are grieved with various trials. The result of a tested faith is “praise and glory and honor” when Jesus returns. Therefore, rejoicing in trials reveals the genuineness of your faith. James 1:2-4 says, “**Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.**”

There was a specific time when David had to flee Jerusalem as he ran from King Saul. And when he left, he didn’t have time to take food or weapons. And he came to Ahimelech the priest who lived in Nob. And as David was leaving, he asked, “*Do you have any weapons?*” And Ahimelech said, “*Here is Goliath’s sword.*” And David said, “*There is none like it, give it to me.*” Why would he say that about a sword? Because that sword had been tested and tried in much battle. David knew he could rely upon such a sword. (1 Sam. 21) How is the sword of your faith? Does it rejoice in trials? Does it get angry and blame God? Suffering is a test. It separates sheep from goats.

5. God uses Suffering to Increase Our Usefulness. John Flavel wrote, “**Let a Christian . . . be but two or three years without an affliction, and he is almost good for nothing.**” A.W. Tozer said, “**It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply.**” God uses suffering to increase our effectiveness in ministry to others.

He does this in different ways. Sometimes God uses suffering to work on our character so that we’ll become more dependent on Christ, and as a result, more useful to others. In John 15:1-2 Jesus says, “**I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.**” Just as a vinedresser cuts away excess foliage to make it more fruitful, so

the Father uses the pruning knife of afflictions to cut away the things in our lives that keep us from being unfruitful.

Sometimes God may put us in difficult circumstances that make us more effective as we make disciples of others. Example: Paul. When Paul wrote to the Philippians he was in prison. But he says in 1:12-14: **“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. ¹⁴ And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.”** In 2 Cor. 4:7-12 Paul also writes: **“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.”** To Paul, his afflictions were sent partly for the purpose of bringing life to those whom he preached and ministered to. This is the paradox of the cross in our personal lives. God brings blessings to others through our weakness. The gospel achieves victory through our apparent defeat.

6. God Uses Suffering to Prepare Us for Glory. Rom. 8:18 says, **“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”** His point is that future glory will far outweigh and compensate for our sufferings. In 2 Cor. 4:16-18 he says, **“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”**

This is something hard to comprehend. And I think we may get this in little doses throughout life. But, somehow, God will use the afflictions, the trials, tests, sufferings of this life to prepare us for future glory in heaven. Think about trying to run a marathon without training. Now, you might say, *“Hey Jon, that’s my kind of marathon.”* Well, I think there is much to be said about the training, the sweat, the time and effort, the injuries, the healthy eating, etc.; all these things, in the end will be worth it. They have prepared you for the finish line.

Listen to this example from C.S. Lewis:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there,

running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”

When we view our afflictions from this perspective, we realize that God is using them to make us into better, more beautiful creatures than we could ever otherwise become. The palace will not be built until the cottage is destroyed. The demolition is painful—but this is the price God is willing to pay in preparing us for glory.

So, these are some of the ways God uses suffering. 1) To teach us his word, 2) to wean us from idols, 3) to discipline us as his own children, 4) to test and purify our faith, 5) to increase our usefulness, and 6) to prepare us for heaven.

So let me ask, “Is suffering good?” Of course! Let me finish the sermon today by reading Rom. 8:28-38: **“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. ³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died-- more than that, who was raised-- who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**