

## SUFFERING AND A BIBLICAL RESPONSE (PART 1)

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Suffering is common in the Bible. Sometimes it is suffering from disease or other effects of the Fall, but often it is at the hands of others. The biblical category of oppression describes the manipulative domination of one person by another.

God speaks of oppression when Pharaoh enslaves the Israelites in the book of Exodus. Pharaoh was cruel and uncaring in his domination. But God noticed the suffering of his people, “And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them” (Exodus 3:9). This is not an isolated incident for we repeatedly learn of God’s love and concern for those who are mistreated, “The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.” (Psalm 9:9)<sup>1</sup>

Not only does God speak of his compassion and mercy for those being dominated, he also speaks of his lack of regard for those who are dominant. In Malachi 3:13-17, the Lord does not accept the offering of the people because of the way they treat their wives. God describes the man whose speech is contentious and offensive, “There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts...” (Proverbs 12:18). Words can be a weapon used to cause pain (Proverbs 25:18-20). Jesus warns against name-calling in Matthew 5:22. Colossians 3:19 instructs husbands not to be harsh when Paul writes, “Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them”.

The Apostle Paul often wrote of his Christian life while suffering.<sup>2</sup> Paul regularly presents believers with two options when they suffer: (1) being ashamed of the gospel and denying the faith (Gal 1:6-9; 6:12), or (2) allowing the gospel to compel obedience and mission in their lives and then suffering for it (2 Tim 1:8; 3:12; cf. Luke 9:23-27).<sup>3</sup>

The fact that suffering injustice is to be expected, does not mean that we harden our heart to the suffering saint. “The issue of suffering is not to be treated in a cold and pedantic manner. Suffering is real and not something to be handled several steps removed. Yet if we address suffering merely subjectively, without focusing on the objective truths of the Bible, then there is all the reason in the world to despair.”<sup>4</sup>

If we were to say that the ultimate goal of helping others in the church comes from 1 Timothy 1:5, “But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith,” then we must focus on bringing that about.

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<sup>1</sup> See also, Genesis 16; 1 Samuel 25; Psalm 146:7-9; Jeremiah 50:33-34; Luke 4:18-19

<sup>2</sup> Pobee comments, “Persecutions and sufferings were a sine qua non of Paul’s apostolic ministry” in John S. Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul*, (Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Sup 6, (1985), 106.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Bolt and Mark Thompson, Bruce W. Winter, “Dangers and Difficulties for the Pauline Missions,” *The Gospel to the Nations: Perspectives on Paul’s Mission* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 286-288.

<sup>4</sup> J Ligon Duncan, *Does Grace Grow Best in Winter?* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Pub., 2009), 8.

*We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*" (Romans 15:1-7, ESV, emphasis added)

The Christian who wants to fulfill her God-given ministry to others must have an open, honest, loving relationship with her brothers and sisters in Christ and understand the hope that is brought into lives through the encouragement of the Scriptures.

In her excellent article, "Can I Become a Biblical Counselor", Julie Ganschow writes:

You are "qualified" to come alongside others if you have a desire to help people. There is undoubtedly something different about people helpers. Many are described as having gifts of mercy, encouragement, discernment, and compassion. Others are servants and givers, and still others are truth tellers who desire to redirect the sheep that have wandered off the path.

There are some personal requirements for those who desire to come alongside other people. Teaching, rebuking, correcting, training in righteousness, and restoration must be done with affectionate admonition because included in the greatest imperative of Jesus Christ was to love one another. Our love is to be sacrificial for those we counsel.<sup>5</sup>

No one suffering wants to have a weak faith. No one suffering wants to question the veracity of the word of God. No one suffering has a desire to struggle with a firm belief in the truths of Scripture. All Christians want to have a faith that is enduring. In reality, however, faith waxes and wanes and is anything but constant. When suffering comes upon us we often respond with perplexity. "Troubles in our jobs, troubles in our marriages, and troubles in our relationships can mount up and attack our spirits."<sup>6</sup>

Faith anticipates God's good purposes.

Overwhelming difficulty does not thwart the purposes of God. God focused worship is fueled and surrounded by the blessings and promises of God. And as with the people in these verses, faith hears God's promises and moves us to act. Faith obeys God regardless. Faith sacrifices for

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<sup>5</sup> Julie, Ganschow, "Can I Become a Biblical Counselor", Blog (August 31, 2015) <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2015/08/31/can-i-become-a-biblical-counselor/>.

<sup>6</sup> RC Sproul, *Surprised by Suffering: The Role of Pain and Death in the Christian Life* (Reformation Trust Publishing (January 15, 2010), 2.

God. Faith can see what God has promised and acts upon it. Faith worships God as the highest prize, worthwhile of treasure.

What is the motivation for our friend to preserve through the trials and hardships of life? Hebrews 11 shows that it may come from those who have suffered before them.

And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. (Hebrews 11:39-12:4)

“All these” points to those Old Testament saints who have gone before and whose faith stands despite their hardship, and even failure. In the Hebrews example here, faith is not measured in what it gains. Faith is measured by what it endures. These saints believed God, and were obedient, even when they did not see results. Our brothers and sisters must move from being results oriented to becoming righteousness oriented. Those suffering want God to fix and take away their problems. The Old Testament saints referenced here looked past their present and suffering and held tightly to their settled hope of the future.

We must help our friends learn to run well, not allowing the hindering weights of sin to affect the race. We would do well to remember times in our life when we dealt with the weight of suffering or personal sin that was discouraging and entangling. It is easy for us to become self-righteous and judgmental, sins that entangle relationships and hinder forgiveness and reconciliation. The sufferer must ask the question, sincerely and often, “Does my behavior and attitude help me run the race or hinder me from running the race?” And so the Christian runs with endurance through the long battle which is life. It is not a life of random events, but a race set before us. While it may demand suffering, it is not by chance. The triune God has planned the course specifically for each runner.

Throughout the race, Jesus sets the pace. Jesus is our example and mentor. It is not simply looking to Jesus, it is looking away from our suffering to Jesus

Charles Simeon writes,

There is a peculiarity in this direction which we must by no means pass over. The Apostle tells us not merely to look unto Jesus, but, in so doing, to look off [ἀφορῶντες] from everything else. We are apt to look at our own weakness, *at the length and difficulties of our way, at the strength and number of those who are endeavoring to cast us down*, or at any thing that tends to discourage us: but we should look off from all these things, and keep our eyes steadily fixed on Jesus as our pattern, and our friend: and then

our difficulties will appear as nothing; and we shall proceed cheerfully in an assured expectation of the prize.”(emphasis added)<sup>7</sup>

The fact is that by the time you have become involved in someone’s life, they probably have already become wearisome, discouraged, and probably have lost hope. And so, we ask them to consider Jesus who endured sinful oppression and injustice worse than any of us will ever endure. We encourage them to not lose perspective because unlike Jesus they have not lost their life. We encourage them to keep running the race. We encourage them to remain submissive, obedient, and hopeful because we know that this present pain is used by God for their good. This is echoed in this text from Hebrews 12.

Therefore, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled (Hebrews 12:12-15).

Our brother or sister may be to the point of physical exhaustion and so we strengthen them by our counsel. We must remind them of the specific plan of God for their life and his purposes amidst the suffering.

We must guide our friend into the path of peace and holiness. Not for the sake of comfort, but as a responsibility. It is something we strive for; we go after it with all effort. For without holiness, no one sees God.

The saint who is suffering must be on constant alert to not become bitter. Through all the hardships and suffering God either brings or allows into their lives, all meant to purify and transform them, they become bitter. My experience with these people is that they lose sleep thinking about it before bed and wake up in the morning with it on their mind. They become angry. They become hard-hearted. They become dissatisfied with the circumstances of their life.

Bitterness is a defiling sin that affects their entire being, staining the heart. You and I must remind them of the grace God is giving them in the midst of their suffering.

Helping one another through suffering is hard work. How do we do it? How do we not become discouraged?

2 Corinthians 4:7-18.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Simeon, *Horae Homileticae Commentary Volume 7*, (Kindle Edition, 2014), Location 21564.

the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, “I believed, and so I spoke,” we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 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.

Our discouragement in helping others is found in the fact that our friends are clay pots that are failing and frail (while at the same time rejoicing in God’s sufficient power). We must understand that there is no other way. The frailty of the vessel is there to show the surpassing power belongs to God and comes from God.

One pastor writes,

Here is the reality of what is actually going on in the trials (V10). In these things we are always carrying about in us the dying of Jesus with the objective that Jesus life might be shown in our body. Now here is the way I understand this. In order for the power of God to be shown in the vessel, the vessel must be being broken so that life can be poured out. So, when we suffer, we are to understand [interpret] that suffering as life releasing.

Further, the reason these circumstances, is that we are handed over to death so that Jesus’ life may be revealed. What an unfathomable mystery this is. The outward difficulties and pressures on the vessel are essential to the release of the treasure: that is, to the display of light and the giving of life.

So the result is that we are sharing the fullest expression of body life. We are entrusted with death so that life may flow to others. Here is the fundamental meaning of the cross for power in ministry. Just as Jesus sacrifice brings life to the church, so our sacrifice brings life to others. This is not some mystical unreality, but is the painful, wearying, sacrificial toil and trouble of pouring out our lives for others. And so the simple question. Will you? We love the beautiful imagery of being treasure filled vessels; do we embrace the brutal reality of being broken for the sake of others?<sup>8</sup>

### **REFLECT AND RESPOND:**

We must see what the suffering brother or sister may not, the invisible and the eternal. If we are prepared with careful study and trust of the Word, we see with spiritual eyes, not on the immediate and acute, but on the eternal and lasting glory and grace of God in our lives and those of our friends. And we have the privilege of helping those suffering to see that the eternal focus produces something glorious.

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<sup>8</sup> Russ Kennedy, *Staying Encouraged in Ministry Struggles*, (Clearcreek Chapel), January 14, 2018.