

WHY SUFFERING?

By Frank and Wendy Parrish

As you have read in the previous article about God's Chastening, it may at times be necessary for God to discipline us – as a loving father chastens his children – so that we can have “*the peaceable fruit of righteousness*” (Heb 12:5-11). The Lord may even use difficult circumstances in our lives as part of that chastening.

However, it would be wrong to think that every time we face a trial or affliction, it is because God is chastening or disciplining us.

Trials can have a variety of sources, so it is quite acceptable to pause and ask, “Is there a specific cause for why I am (or my loved one is) suffering?”

SOURCES OF SUFFERING

There are several sources for trial or affliction. A thorough study of any one of these could fill many pages; but we will just *briefly* discuss the primary ones at this time.

But beyond that, our suffering can be caused by one, or more than one, of the following:

1. SINFUL CHOICES – Oftentimes our own sinful or rebellious choices (or the choices of those near us) can bring terrible consequences into our lives. God does not desire us to suffer consequences, but rather to make good choices and not have to suffer bad consequences. We are to live according to His Word and instructions. He gives us His Word (laws) to help us make the right choices and live this life the way He designed for it to work.

But humans can be weak, and make bad choices; even Christians can make bad choices. We may choose to reject God's Word and go our own way. When we do, the consequences of our rebellion and sin can cause pain or suffering for us or our loved ones (see Galatians 6:7-8; Proverbs 11:18-19).

But we are certainly not left in this hopeless state. Remember – **we can be forgiven**. The Bible teaches us that whenever we repent and confess our

sins, and turn from our wicked ways with true humility, the Lord not only forgives our sin, He cleanses us from even the unrighteousness of it (see 1John 1:7-9). However, we may still have to live with the consequences of our sinful choice.

For instance, we may give in to the temptation to steal something. When we are found out, we may feel the pain or shame of rejection by others. We might have to spend time suffering in jail, or working hard to repay the one from whom we stole.

God will forgive our sinful acts when we repent, but the consequences can still bring difficulty to us, or to those we love.

[For more on sin and forgiveness, see Ezekiel chapter 18; 2Pet 3:9; 2Chron 7:14; Neh 9:17; Eph 1:7.]

2. GOD'S CHASTENING OR TESTING – It is clear in Scripture that God disciplines and chastens His children. Please see the ACTS Study on “God’s Chastening” to understand more about how that can relate to our suffering.

In addition to chastening, **God also tests us** (Prov 17:3), and He may use circumstances to do that.

God already knows what is in our hearts, and it is not always good. The Bible tells us that *“the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?”* (Jer 17:9). *“For the righteous God tests the hearts and minds”* (Ps 7:9).

God desires us to be free from sinful and selfish ways. We may be blind to the sin or deceitfulness in our heart. God wants us to recognize our sin so that we will repent, and ask Him to forgive us and deliver us. He does not want us bound or controlled by our sinful desires and choices.

It has been said, “circumstances do not **make** the man, they **reveal** the man”. Sometimes it requires extreme pressure, difficulty or suffering to reveal what is deep in the heart. It can be anger, fear, jealousy, pride, sexual immorality – or many other things. God knows that these things are harmful to us and to others.

Sin in our lives hinders our relationship with God, and our service to His Church. It is also hurtful to others or damages our relationships with them.

The Lord tests the heart in order **for us** to see what is in our heart. **We need God's help and delivering power** to free us from the hidden (or known) sin in our lives!

It is extremely important to remember that **testing is not the same as **temptation** to sin. God **will** test us, but He will **never** tempt someone to sin (see James 1:2-5, 12-17). God is committed to help us escape temptation and sin **IF** we will obey and follow Him (see 1Corinthians 10:18; 2Peter 2:9).

3. DEMONIC ATTACK – Ephesians 6:10-20 makes it very clear that there are satanic forces that come against the people of God. The devil bombards us with “fiery darts” of lies, deception, unrighteousness, doubt, fear, affliction, oppression – anything he can do to discourage us from loving and serving God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. These attacks can result in suffering for the saints of God.

But the Lord uses this resistance from the devil to mature and strengthen us as warriors for God's Kingdom. The Bible tells us that we do not fight against flesh and blood (2Cor 10:3-5). God desires us to be people who know how to rise up and resist the **spiritual** forces that oppose God and His people.

Thankfully, Ephesians 6 – and other places in Scripture – reveal how to prepare ourselves to withstand and overcome satanic attacks.

[For further study, see the example of Jesus in Matthew 4:1-11; Matthew 12:28-29, 16:19; Ephesians 6:1-11; 1John 3:8; Rev 12:11.)

4. PERSECUTION – *“Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution”* (2Tim 3:12). Satan hates God, and Satan hates the object of God's love – humankind. Satan actively opposes the godly, and inspires evil men to come against the saints with all manner of cruelty and vengeance. And we may suffer in the midst of this persecution.

God will grant either the grace to be delivered from persecution, or the grace to endure it (see 2 Corinthians 12:9).

In Daniel 3, God miraculously delivered three godly men who were thrown into a fiery furnace for not bowing down to a golden idol. They were uninjured, with only the ropes that bound them burned away.

In Acts 16, Paul and Silas were beaten with rods, and thrown in prison. Though they suffered this persecution, God still miraculously spared their lives and delivered them from jail.

But there are others in the Bible who faced terrible physical pain, and even gave their lives in martyrdom – and God did not spare them (read Hebrews chapter 11). Neither did He spare His own Son (Rom 8:32).

It is at the times when we are most vulnerable and weak in suffering for Christ's sake that we experience the strength of God (2Cor 12:10). We come to know the Lord in a much more meaningful and powerful way – sharing in what the Bible calls ***“the fellowship of His sufferings”*** (Phil 3:10).

The Apostle Paul understood a deep truth about suffering – that it somehow allows the glory of God to be revealed in us, and in our circumstances. He knew that even the worst suffering on this earth seemed like nothing ***“compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us”*** (Rom 8:18; see also 2Cor 4:17).

We should never seek out or desire persecution. But if it should come our way, we can be sure that either:

1. a) God's power will deliver us from it, or
2. b) His grace will enable us to endure it. Either way, we can be certain that God will be glorified both in us and through us! [See 1Peter 4:12-19, 5:10.]
3. **“Natural” Circumstances** – The world we live in was not created as the chaotic and broken place it is today. When God first formed the world, He called it ***“very good”*** (Gen 1:31). It was a perfect world, free from sin, corruption, sickness, pain and death. But when man chose to rebel against the Loving Creator – and chose sin and selfishness – that brought corruption into the soul of man and into the perfect world God had created (see Genesis 3).

As a result, such things as sickness and disease, pain, famine, poverty, injustice, war and natural disasters have become part of humanity's sinful and fallen state. All people – good and bad, Christian and non-Christian – are affected by man's continued selfishness and our world's fallen and corrupt condition. **The Bible tells us that *“rain [falls] on the just and the unjust”* (Matt 5:45).**

Even after we are saved, we may still experience the anguish and pain of living in this broken world, and we may suffer because of it. God may intervene in our circumstance, or He may not. But we who know Christ have a certain future hope, and await the day of full deliverance *“from this present evil age”* (Gal 1:4), when even *“the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty...”* (Rom 8:21).

WHAT DO I DO?

We have looked at some of the reasons for suffering. However, this may or may not help us to know the source of **our** particular trial or suffering. There is an element of mystery to God – His ways and thoughts are very different from ours (Isa 55:8,9). Some things that happen in this life may never be fully understood until our eyes are fully opened, and we see Him face to face (1Cor 13:12).

SEEK THE LORD

But we can still **respond** to God in the midst of our suffering. Haggai 1:5 reminds us to “consider our ways”. During trial and suffering, take extra time to come before the Lord and examine your heart and your life.

Pray like David did, and ask the Lord to search your heart, and reveal if there is any anxiety or wickedness there (Ps 139:23,24). Take much time to pray, and to wait on the Lord for an answer (Isa 30:18). Be sure to repent of any sin or ungodly actions.

We should certainly read the Bible, to feed our spirit and to learn more about Who God is. The better we know the Lord and His Word, the more we will walk in His ways, and be comforted in our suffering (Isa 30:20-21).

EXAMINE YOURSELF

During trial, it is also good to examine yourself. Look into your own life, and see if there is any part of you that is not submitted to God. Take time to recommit everything in your life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ (see 1Peter 4:19), including your relationship with God, your family and your job or ministry.

THIS I CAN KNOW...

It is easy to become confused in the midst of suffering. We may feel as if portions of the Bible no longer make sense. We might mistakenly think that God has abandoned us, or for some reason does not love us. Many strong believers have even abandoned their faith in God during a trial, angry at the Lord for their suffering.

It is important during times of suffering to take our eyes off of the things we do not understand, and to focus directly on the things that we KNOW to be true (Phil 4:6-8). The Bible reveals to us three crowning truths about our relationship with God in this life.

THE TRUTH

1. God is always at work in the lives of His children. Whether we face persecution, sore temptation, bitter disappointment, suffering or pain – **God is actively at work to bring about His highest good in every situation.** But what is God’s “highest good” for His people?

We see the answer in Romans 8:28-30: *“And we know that all things work together **for good** to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined **to be conformed to the image of His Son**, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these **He also glorified.**”*

The good result that God always intends is to see His children *“conformed to the image of His Son”*. The final result of this will be our full salvation, and “glorification” with Him (v 30) in eternity to come.

This is the point where many sincere believers stumble. They interpret God’s “good” to be their comfort, joy or prosperity. Then, when they encounter trial or suffering, they think that God has abandoned them, or that He has removed His “blessings” and stopped working in their life. They have forgotten Jesus’ words, *“In the world you will have tribulation”* (John 16:33).

The truth is that God never promises us a life of ease or a life without pain. But He **does** promise to **use everything** we experience in this life – even pain and suffering – to shape us into the image of Jesus, IF we will turn to Him and allow Him to, and if we will PRAY in the midst of trial (Romans 8:26,27).

And He promises even more...

2. His presence will never leave us. When trials and troubles come into our lives, we may wonder if God has abandoned or forsaken us. We may be tempted by doubt, fear and unbelief. Yet God declares to us that *“I will never leave you nor forsake you”* (Heb 13:5); and Jesus said, *“Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age”* (Matt 28:20). His presence, His grace and His Holy Spirit have been given to us freely (John 14:16-18; Rom 8:26-27).

3. God’s great love for us will never change. He loves us with an *“everlasting love”* (Jer 31:3). We are the object of God’s infinite, eternal and all-powerful love. We are promised that **NOTHING** can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ (Rom 8:35-39). Throughout all the trials, tribulations and hardships that may come into our lives – whether as a result of our own sin, other people’s sin, or the fallen condition of the world in general – we **know** that **God’s love for us will never change!**

BEACON OF FAITH

Dear church worker and fellow saint, it is our hope and prayer for you that, whatever your circumstances, you will be able to **rejoice**, saying:

*“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and **God of all comfort, Who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God”** (2Cor 1:3-4).*

As you persevere through the trials and tribulations of this fallen world, your life and ministry can be a source of great comfort to others. You will become a beacon of faith, shining on everyone around you. God will work in you, to make you more like Christ. Then your life will be a testimony of God’s love, power and sustaining grace, both to those who know Christ, and to those who do not!