

## Suffering

### Preparing to Suffer

Why do some experience tremendous suffering and have their confidence in and love for God grow, while others fall apart? Well, there are probably as many answers to this question as there are people who suffer but one consistent reason for emotional collapse is that they sufferer was not prepared to suffer. They were surprised by it's onset, severity and/or persistence.

Most American Christians do not expect to suffer much or for very long. They expect life to be good because that is how it has been for the most part. When young, living in a growing economy, being part of a class with financial and social supports and being a member of the body of Christ, things generally go well. Even when something bad happens, it eventually works out because they have many reliable resources from which to draw. As long as their faith is untested, they might believe that they are optimistic because they trust God. However, as they age many find that bad things happen that do not pass quickly or at all: character problems persist; children rebel and seem unlikely to return; marital problems do not resolve; they may have difficult setbacks in ministry or physical problems develop that may be chronic, debilitating or fatal. In such situations, middle class Christians may find a severe collapse of their 'faith' in part because they inadvertently trusted their life situation more than God.

Also, when suffering chronic disappointment, many drift toward people or experiences that let them feel better about themselves or feel nothing at all. C. S. Lewis warned about this in, *The Screwtape Letters*.

The long, dull monotonous years of middle-aged prosperity or middle-aged adversity are excellent campaigning weather. You see, it is so hard for these creatures to *persevere*. The routine of adversity, the gradual decay of youthful loves and youthful hopes, the quiet despair (hardly felt as pain) of ever overcoming the chronic temptations with which we have again and again defeated them, the drabness which we create in their lives and the inarticulate resentment with which we teach them to respond to it—all this provides admirable opportunities of *wearing out a soul by attrition*. If, on the other hand, the middle years prove prosperous, our position is even stronger. Prosperity knits a man to the World. He feels that he is "finding his place in it," while really it is finding its place in him. His increasing reputation, his widening circle of acquaintances, his sense of importance, the growing pressure of absorbing and agreeable work, build up in him a sense of being really at home in earth which is just what we want. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, # 28

- **Suffering is normal** - prepare by expecting it  
We need a deeply held conviction that a loving and powerful God permits and causes suffering; that suffering, at this time in history, is normal. We need not be surprised when we experience it because we will experience it.
  - Suffering is normal because the world itself is broken (Genesis 3 pain, sorrow, hard work, futility, relational alienation, alienation from God, having lost access to the tree of life there is sickness and death; Ecclesiastes 1 everything is broken<sup>1</sup>; Romans 8:20,22,23 the whole creation groans in hope of redemption)  
*...in this world you will have many trials and sorrows...* John 16:33
  - Suffering is normal because everybody sins and the natural effects of sin include suffering (Ps.81:10-12; Prov.1:20-33; 4:19; 6:27; 13:15; 15:19; Matthew 18:15-20; Romans 1:18-32 the whole ugly downward spiral of sin & its corruption; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 6:18; 1 Pet.2:20; 4:15).

While suffering at our own hands will diminish if we mature – thus sinning less frequently and egregiously - suffering from the sin of others may increase because loving engagement with others brings greater risk of hurt (Lk.9:23; 17:1-10; John 15:13; 2 Cor.4:7-12; 6:4-13; 11:23ff).

- Suffering is normal because the world persecutes the followers of God (John 15:18-27; Acts 14:22; 20:33-35; Romans 12:10; 15:1-3; 1 Corinthians 8-10 – esp. 9:1-27; Philipians 2:1-4; 3:7-11; Colossians 1:24; 2 Tim.2:3f; 1 Peter 2:12, 18-25; 3:15-17; 4:1-2; 4:12-19). Consider the OT examples listed in Heb.11. As Christ summarizes in Luke 13, "it cannot be that a prophet would

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<sup>1</sup> Life is *hebel* meaning both that everything passes away and that very little of what we experience makes sense to us.

perish outside Jerusalem.”

*Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. 1 Peter 4:12*

- Suffering is normal because, at times, God directly acts against sinners for the sake of His own reputation (Ps.76:10; Isa.48:11; Ez.20:9,14,22,44; the destruction of Assyria and Babylon; Nebuchadnezzar because of his hubris Daniel 4:30; Herod because he received adulation as a god Acts 12:21-23; Ro.9:22),<sup>2</sup> His covenant (the curses of the Mosaic covenant Deuteronomy 28:15–30; the suffering of the kings under the terms of the Davidic covenant 2 Sam.7)<sup>3</sup> to block the spread of evil (c.f. the judgments of Babel, Noah, Sodom/Gomorrah & the Great Tribulation yet to come) and for retribution (Isaiah 1:14, 20, 24, 28, 31; 9:8-10:34; 26:11; 26:20-27:1; 28:17-22; 312-9; 35:4; 37:28f; 59:15b,17,18; 63:1-6; 65:6-7; 66:6; Jer.5:9, 29; Hell itself is a promise of retributive justice for those who will not repent).

God does not take pleasure in judgment (Ezek.18:23,32; 33:11; 1Tim.2:4; 2Pet.3:9; Isa.28:21 calls it God's 'strange work') and we are forbidden to take pleasure in it (Jonah; Ez.25:3,6f; 32:18; Prov.24:17; Mt.5:22) or be apathetic about it (Amos 6; Eccl.7:2f).

Christians may also suffer because God is judging them for their sin (while David was forgiven, his son died 2 Sam.12:13,15; Ananias & Saphira died Acts 5:1-11; illness and death for believers who abused communion 1 Cor. 11:27-30; Paul's judgment of believing false teachers 1 Cor.5:5a; 1 Tim.1:20; illness and sin linked in James 5:16). But, this kind of judgment is limited in scope. It does not involve eternal judgment because Christians have passed out of this danger through the work of Christ (Ro.5:9; 8:1; 1 Cor.3:15; 5:5b) and it absolutely does not involve God rejecting his son or daughter.

We must not speculate that a person's difficulties are due to God's judgment because our knowledge is incredibly limited, corrupted by the fall and there are alternative explanations for suffering that have nothing to do with God's direct judgment that we may never understand in this life (e.g.. consider God's anger over the false conclusions of Job's friends; consider the words of Jesus concerning this kind of speculation Luke 13:1ff; John 9:2ff). Apart from special revelation, we are not in a position to decide if the source of suffering is directly from God. We can all think of sins that might merit judgment but that does not warrant drawing such conclusions. It is a complete waste of time to indulge in the, "I wonder if..." game. Worse than that, it's harmful because it creates unnecessary guilt and shame; unhelpful comparing & social isolation for the sufferer and excites hubris & pride in the one who assumes the role of God's interpreter (e.g. Jerry Falwell claiming AIDS is God's judgment on gays; Westboro Baptist Church claiming military deaths are God's judgment for allowing gays in the military; Rom.2:1 the hypocrisy of judging others).

- **Suffering has pitfalls that the Gospel protects against**

It is easy to be temporarily or permanently lost in our suffering. The traps of suffering include **guilt** (e.g. I did something wrong and now I'm being punished for it), **shame** (e.g. I am unlovable and worthless), **doubt** (e.g. is God good?; does God even care?; a man remembered when he lost his mother at 10 - he thought she was not to blame and he was not to blame and so God was to blame and was an atheist from that moment forward; denying anger toward God isn't helpful (c.f. Jonah 4) and **entitlement/self-pity** (e.g. I don't deserve this!)

There are secondary traps too like out of control self soothing and self distraction.

It is important for us to become deeply rooted in the Gospel of God before we suffer or baring

<sup>2</sup> He delays judgment and is merciful for the sake of his name also at times (1 Sam.12:22; Isaiah 43:7; 48:8,9,11; Dan.9:19; Ez.36:22-32). God prefers repentance and diligently pursues this, at length, before passing judgment.

<sup>3</sup> Note, however, that God's response to the breaking of covenant is very measured. Centuries of covenant violation preceded the exile of Israel and later Judah and during those centuries God sent prophets, social and economic hardship to soften people's hearts. Similarly, kings who committed heinous atrocities received mercy when they repented (e.g. Manasseh 2 Chron.33:13).

that, while we are suffering. The Gospel – that God, through Christ’s atonement & the power of the Spirit binds us to Himself in a permanent love relationship – rejects all of the traps of suffering.

- The gospel tells us that our guilt & shame were absorbed by Christ - we are not being rejected or punished by God.  
The earlier discussion of temporal judgment of Christians is important to consider. If a sufferer sees a direct connection between a particular sin and a particular suffering then they should repent and turn to God who freely forgives. They should attempt to repair damage done by their sin. This is the proper response to real guilt. God does discipline his people for their sake and for the sake of His kingdom and glory but He is not retributive. He is not getting even with us and so we must not think in terms of punishment but discipline if we are confident that we are suffering because of some particular sin.  
Three warnings need to be heeded:
  - Do not speculate about the causes of other people’s suffering. We cannot know.
  - Do not draw inordinately strong conclusions about the cause of your own suffering. We do ourselves, others and God a great disservice by obsessing about the question of, “Why?”
- The gospel tells us that we are loved by a powerful and wise Father-God (Rom.8) - we have not lost God’s love
  - The gospel tells us that God places a higher value on His kingdom than on circumstantial happiness (Rev.2:10) and so will use suffering to advance His purposes including:
    - Bringing sinners to repentance (John 12:32; 2 Cor.1:6; 2 Tim.1:8ff; 2:3ff; Heb.2:9; 13:12)
    - Bringing glory to his name (John12:23-26; Acts 5:41; 9:16; Phil.3:7f; 1 Pet.4:13,16)

## Reorienting

Pain is profoundly disorienting. We can become blind to everything and everyone except our hardship.

We can get lost in our feelings of sadness leading to depression; lost in our feelings of helplessness that can lead to anger and from there to bitterness; lost in our shame leading to self-loathing, depression or rage; lost in our fear leading to profound anxiety.<sup>4</sup>

We can get so attached to what we lost that we adopt an identity as the ‘suffering one.’<sup>5</sup> Tragically, some finish their lives in such bondage.

We can become so obsessed with, “Why is this happening to me?” that we can do nothing fruitful in our tragedy.

Because of the disorientation of suffering, getting reoriented is vital during the acute phase of suffering and maintaining that orientation is critical during the chronic phase of loss. But reoriented to what?

So, when disoriented by hardship we become reoriented by turning toward God and remembering that this pain will pass.

The Bible texts that most vividly demonstrate the importance of moving toward God and remembering that suffering is temporary are the lamentations.

- **Wisdom from biblical lamentations**

Biblically, lamentations are complaints to God. They are full of sorrow, fear, anger and shame that often include requests for help and affirmations of trust.

Lamentations appear in many places in the Old and New Testaments<sup>6</sup> but they are particularly concentrated in the Psalms (~1/3 are lamentations) and in the books of Habakkuk and Lamentations. It is here that we will pause to consider how to reorient ourselves toward God when suffering.

- **Habbakkuk**

Habakkuk is an admirable man because he is honest with God. He wrestles with God by asking hard questions but he also listens to God’s response (2:1). When God’s response is dissatisfying for him, he chooses to trust God anyway.

The book of Habakkuk begins with his complaint against the sin and corruption of Judah. God

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<sup>4</sup> “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.” C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Freese, *Help for your grief*

<sup>6</sup> Elijah’s complain about the widows dead son in 1 Kings 17:20; Hezekiah’s lament over the Assyrian threat in 2 Kings 19; over his own illness in 2 Kings 20; Jehoshaphat’s lament over the Moab/Ammon invasion in 2 Chronicles 20; Jesus prayer in Gethsemane; Jesus reciting Psalm 22:1 on the cross; the lament of the martyrs in Revelation 6

responds by saying that he is sending Babylon to remove Judah from the land. Habakkuk then complains that Babylon is worse than Judah. God responds by saying in effect, "I am going to do what I said anyway."<sup>7</sup> Then, Habakkuk responds as follows:

Lord, I have heard the report about You *and* I fear...In wrath remember mercy...I heard and my inward parts trembled, At the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, And in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, For the people to arise *who* will invade us. Though the fig tree should not blossom And there be no fruit on the vines, *Though* the yield of the olive should fail And the fields produce no food, Though the flock should be cut off from the fold And there be no cattle in the stalls, Yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength; And He has made my feet like hinds' feet, And makes me walk on my high places. Habakkuk 3:2,16-19

Notice the honesty about his grief, fear and desires.

Notice the confidence that God has control of & control in these hardships.

Notice his focus on a safe & secure future.

Notice the decision to focus on God rather than on the hardship.<sup>8</sup>

- **Jeremiah**

Jeremiah authored the book that bears his name but also the book of Lamentations. Lamentations was written during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. Jeremiah is living in the circumstances God predicted for Habakkuk. At the beginning of the book and the end Jeremiah describes the horrors of the siege but in the middle of the lamentation he says:

The thought of my suffering and homelessness is bitter beyond words. I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss. Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning. I say to myself, "The Lord is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in him!" The Lord is good to those who depend on him, to those who search for him. So it is good to wait quietly for salvation from the Lord...no one is abandoned by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he also shows compassion because of the greatness of his unfailing love. For he does not enjoy hurting people or causing them sorrow...Who can command things to happen without the Lord's permission? Does not the Most High send both calamity and good? Then why should we, mere humans, complain when we are punished for our sins? Instead, let us test and examine our ways. Let us turn back to the Lord.

Lamentations 3:19-26, 31-33, 37-40<sup>9</sup> NLT

Jeremiah is suffering because of the sin of others. He is hungry, homeless & poorly clothed because he is experiencing their judgment right along with them.

Jeremiah is suffering because he is a prophet of God to a people who do not want to hear from God and so they persecute him.

Jeremiah is also suffering because he loves these sinful people. He is grief stricken because they are starving, sick and dying for their own sin.

Notice, like Habakkuk, the honesty about grief, fear and desires.

Notice too that he fixed his hope on God.

Notice his compassion for people suffering for their self inflicted wounds.

- **Psalms of Lament**

We don't have time to survey the 50+ psalms of lament tonight<sup>10</sup> and so I would like us to

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<sup>7</sup> Habakkuk 2:2-3

<sup>8</sup> We are called to rejoice in our suffering (Ro.5:3; 1Pet.4:12-19), not rejoice that we are suffering. Habakkuk shows us how this is done: focus on God, not circumstances. He exults in the Lord. He rejoices in the God of his salvation. He appreciates the protection God provides for him.

<sup>9</sup> I selected portions of this that are more broadly relevant. Some of the commentary of this section concerns their violation of the Mosaic covenant which we, as Christians, are not subject to.

<sup>10</sup> We will focus on a personal lament but there are many kinds of laments: Psalms 12, 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 90, 94, 123, 126, 129 are

examine just one: Psalm 42-43. I know it looks like two psalms but it is really one psalm that was accidentally split in two.<sup>11</sup>

This lament is built around a refrain repeated three times (42:5, 11, 43:5):

Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him For the help of His presence.

There's a progression & climax as the author contemplates first the past, then present and finally the future. Three kinds of complaint are evident. He is discouraged by: his own thoughts, his enemies and God himself. Notice too how the author shifts back and forth in his prayer complaining and expressing hope – he ends by expressing hope.

Again, we see honesty about anger, grief, fear and desires.<sup>12</sup>

Like the other passages the psalmist fixes his hope and desire on God.<sup>13</sup>

Notice the Psalmist remembers God's past faithfulness.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, notice that he affirms his belief that God loves and will rescue him (this will not last).<sup>15</sup>

- **Turning toward God**

Suffering shoves our face into the horizontal plane – the realm of the world and what we've lost. Reorienting lifts our eyes to the vertical – toward God who knows and cares about us; who has control over our situation and who is completely good.

Sometimes the best we can do is weep, groan and call out to God for help. At other times we may have the energy to prayerfully meditate on scripture that reminds us of God's power, presence and love. Regardless of how much energy we possess, the relief we seek is in the presence of God and it is to Him we must turn.

"The cure for spiritual depression is neither to look in at our grief, nor look back to the past, nor around at our problems, but away and up to the living God. He is our help and our God, and if we trust in him now, we shall soon have cause to praise him again."

John Stott, *Favorite Psalms* p.57, writing about Psalm 42-43

Turning toward God involves two moves: being honest with God and choosing to trust God.

- **Being honest with God**

Many Christians stuff theological truths into their pain and doubt. We begin to think, "God doesn't know or care about me" but then quickly recite verses that contradict our doubts. Hiding doubts behind truths does not make them go away, however.

As we'll see here in a moment, when godly people suffer in the Bible, they are brutally honest with God. The Spirit inspired psalmists to pray in ways that teach us how to seek God honestly.

We are honest with God because we know that he takes our sorrows seriously.

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corporate laments; Psalms 3, 4, 5, 7, 9-10, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 36, 39, 40:12-17, 41, 42-43, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 64, 69, 70, 71, 77, 86, 89, 119, 120, 139, 141, 142 are mostly personal laments; Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143 are laments of repentance; Psalms 35, 69, 88, 109, 137, 140 are imprecatory laments (i.e. curses). I am not addressing the problem of anger toward a perpetrator in this session. But if this is part of your suffering, I would ask you to consider the insight of Brueggeman, "It is an act of profound faith to entrust our most precious hatreds to God, knowing that they will be taken seriously" *Message of the Psalms*, p. 77

<sup>11</sup> There's no title for Ps. 43; notice the repetition of the refrain in 42:5, 11 & 43:5; the thought development is coherent from remembrance (42:4,6) to hope of restoration (43:3) and both are in a lament format with 43 following the pattern begun in 42.

<sup>12</sup> 42:2, 3, 7,9,10, 43:2; We're too afraid to tell God what we're thinking but not giving voice to doubts doesn't make them go away, On the other hand, voicing anger, doubt, fear & anxiety opens it up to the truth (e.g. Sarah missed the opportunity to expose her doubt about the power of God to God's scrutiny and instruction) Note Job 21:6...he says, "I'm shocked I'm saying this myself."

<sup>13</sup> 42:1,2,5,11, 43:1,3,4,5; c.f. Ps.121:1-2; But it's right here that we so often turn instead to our own strategies that we've used time and again to no avail.

<sup>14</sup> 42:4,6

<sup>15</sup> 42:5,8,11, 43:5

o **Trusting God**<sup>16</sup>

“When a Christian looks around, seeing no reason to trust God and does anyway - the enemy shudders.”

C. S. Lewis

We need to be honest in our suffering while choosing to focus our attention and hope on God himself. He is the prize. He is the creator who has allowed us to lose some part of His creation for purposes we may only understand partly or never comprehend in this life.

“I do not know why but I know Him who does know why.”

Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*

The key element in reorienting is this one captured by Corrie ten Boom. Is it enough for us to know that God knows what’s going on; why it’s going on and how He’s going to use it to redeem others and glorify himself? Is God enough?

The gospel tells us that God is enough; that we have everything we need for life and godliness in Him.

You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.

Psalm 56:8

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed.  
Psalm 34:18

He heals the brokenhearted and bandages their wounds...How great is our Lord! His power is absolute! His understanding is beyond comprehension!

Psalm 147:3,5

“Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.”

Matthew 11:28-30

So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honor. Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you.

1 Peter 5:7

For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as *we are*, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:15f

• **Reminding yourself – “This will pass.”**

For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.  
Corinthians 4:17,18

Pain demands our full attention. It would be a problem to be in a state of suffering and not attend to it or to keep distracting ourselves from its effects. It is also a problem to devote our entire attention to our suffering.

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<sup>16</sup> Reading Hebrews 11:1 – 12:4 is a bracing challenge to trust God when circumstances fail to support our faith.

The Persian poet Attar told a story of a ring inscribed, "This too will pass."

In a sense, we made the first point last week when we said that suffering is normal; that we shouldn't be lulled into the harmful belief that perpetual happiness is our birthright.

This week we need to make the opposite observation, suffering does not last forever. Suffering is transient – it will end.<sup>17</sup>

Habakkuk fixed his attention on how God would protect and care for him no matter what. Jeremiah reminded himself that God's mercies were new every day. The psalmist expressed confidence that God would deliver him.

Even if this life is forever changed (e.g. Job's children & servants were dead and his skin was scarred), God will bless us and in the end will completely release us from all suffering (Rev.21:4); will give us glory (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:17) and full understanding (1 Cor. 13:12).

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<sup>17</sup> 1 Peter 1:5,6 'protected for a salvation to be revealed...though suffer **for a little while**'; 1 Peter 5:10 'After you have suffered **for a little while**, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen *and* establish you.'