

**WHY DO
CHRISTIANS
SUFFER?!**

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Forward

1 Peter 2:19

For God is pleased with you when, for the sake of your conscience, you patiently endure unfair treatment.

If your life is miserable, don't assume you have fallen out of God's favor. You may be suffering for doing good in an evil world.

Mixing straw with mud made bricks stronger and more durable. Pharaoh had supplied the slaves with straw, but now he made them find their own straw and keep up their production quota as well

When we are suffering, we often feel as though our pain will never end. Peter gave these faithful Christians the wider perspective. In comparison with eternity, their suffering would last only "a little while."

Again the Israelites hit rock bottom before turning back to God. How much suffering they could have avoided if they had trusted him! Turning to God shouldn't be a last resort; we should look to him for help each day.

Throughout this study, you will see many scriptures to help understand Suffering. Be encouraged. Be encouraged.

Chapter 1



Suffering may come from obeying God.

Exodus 5:4-9

"Who do you think you are," Pharaoh shouted, "distracting the people from their tasks? Get back to work! Look, there are many people here in Egypt, and you are stopping them from doing their work."

That same day Pharaoh sent this order to the slave drivers and foremen he had set over the people of Israel: "Do not supply the people with any more straw for making bricks. Let them get it themselves!

But don't reduce their production quotas by a single brick. They obviously don't have enough to do. If they did, they wouldn't be talking about going into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to their God. [9] Load them down with more work. Make them sweat! That will teach them to listen to these liars!"

Moses and Aaron took their message to Pharaoh just as God directed. The unhappy result was harder work and more oppression for the Hebrews. Sometimes hardship comes as a result of obeying God. Are you following God but still suffering—or suffering even worse than before?

If your life is miserable, don't assume you have fallen out of God's favor. You may be suffering for doing well in an evil world.

Mixing straw with mud made bricks stronger and more durable. Pharaoh had supplied the slaves with straw, but now he made them find their own straw and keep up their production quota as well.

Developing eternal perspective toward Suffering

Leviticus 26:40-45

"But at last my people will confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors for betraying me and being hostile toward me.

Finally, when I have given full expression to my hostility and have brought them to the land of their enemies, then at last their disobedient hearts will be humbled, and they will pay for their sins.

Then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, with Isaac, and with Abraham, and I will remember the land. And the land will enjoy its years of Sabbath rest, as it lies deserted. At last the people will receive the due punishment for their sins, for they rejected my regulations and despised my laws.

"But despite all this, I will not utterly reject or despise them while they are in exile in the land of their enemies. I will not cancel my covenant with them by wiping them out. I, the Lord, am their God.

I will remember my ancient covenant with their ancestors, whom I brought out of Egypt while all the nations watched. I, the Lord, am their God."

These verses show what God meant when he said he is slow to anger (Exodus 34:6).

Even if the Israelites chose to disobey and were scattered among their enemies, God would still give them the opportunity to repent and return to him. His purpose was not to destroy them, but to help them grow. Our day-to-day experiences and hardships are sometimes overwhelming; unless we can see that God's purpose is to bring about continual growth in us, we may despair.

The hope we need is well expressed

Jeremiah 29:11-12:

“ ‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.’ ”

To retain hope while we suffer shows we understand God's merciful ways of relating to his people.

1 Peter 5:10

In his kindness God called you to his eternal glory by means of Jesus Christ. After you have suffered a little while, he will restore, support, and strengthen you, and he will place you on a firm foundation.

When we are suffering, we often feel as though our pain will never end. Peter gave these faithful Christians the wider perspective. In comparison with eternity, their suffering would last only “a little while.”

Chapter 2



How Israelites could have avoided there suffering

Judges 6:6

And Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites; and the children of Israel cried unto the Lord.

Again the Israelites hit rock bottom before turning back to God. How much suffering they could have avoided if they had trusted him! Turning to God shouldn't be a last resort; we should look to him for help each day. This isn't to say life will always be easy. There will be struggles, but God will give us the strength to live through them. Don't wait until you're at the end of your rope. Call on God first in every situation.

Does it take suffering to turn you back to God?

1 Samuel 5:6-7

Then the Lord began to afflict the people of Ashdod and the nearby villages with a plague of tumors.

When the people realized what was happening, they cried out, "We can't keep the Ark of the God of Israel here any longer! He is against us! We will all be destroyed along with our god Dagon."

Lessons from Job's life about

Job 1:1

There was a man named Job who lived in the land of Uz. He was blameless, a man of complete integrity. He feared God and stayed away from evil.

Job is portrayed as a wealthy man of upright character who loves God. Yet God allows Satan to destroy his flocks, his possessions, his children, and his health. Job refuses to give up on God, even though he does not understand why this is happening to him. We, too, must trust God when we do not understand the difficulties we face.

As we read the book of Job, we have information that the characters of the story do not. Job, the main character of the book, lost all he had through no fault of his own.

As he struggled to understand why all this was happening to him, it became clear that he was not meant to know the reasons. He would have to face life with the answers and explanations held back. Only then would his faith fully develop.

We must experience life as Job did—one day at a time and without complete answers to all of life's questions. Will we, like Job, trust God no matter what? Or will we give in to the temptation to say that God doesn't really care?

As we see calamity and suffering in the book of Job, we must remember that we live in a fallen world where good behavior is not always rewarded and bad behavior is not always punished.

When we see a notorious criminal prospering or an innocent child in pain, we say, "That's wrong." And it is. Sin has twisted justice and made our world unpredictable and ugly.

The book of Job shows a good man suffering for no apparent fault of his own. Sadly, our world is like that. But Job's story does not end in despair. Through Job's life we can see that faith in God is justified even when our situations look hopeless.

Faith based on rewards or prosperity is hollow. To be unshakable, faith must be built on the confidence that God's ultimate purpose will come to pass.

Suffering destroys counterfeit faith.

Job 1:9

Satan replied to the Lord, "Yes, Job fears God, but not without good reason!"

Satan attacked Job's motives, saying that Job was blameless and upright only because he had no reason to turn against God. Ever since he had started following God, everything had gone well for Job. Satan wanted to prove that Job worshiped God, not out of love, but because God had given him so much.

Satan accurately analyzed why many people trust God. They are fair-weather believers, following God only when everything is going well or for what they can get. Adversity destroys this superficial faith.

But adversity strengthens real faith by causing believers to dig their roots deeper into God in order to withstand the storms. How deep does your faith go? Put the roots of your faith down deep into God so that you can withstand any storm you may face.

Silence may be most helpful to those who are suffering

Job 2:13

Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and nights. And no one said a word, for they saw that his suffering was too great for words.

Why did the friends arrive and then just sit quietly? According to Jewish tradition, people who come to comfort someone in mourning should not speak until the mourner speaks.

Often the best response to another person's suffering is silence. Job's friends realized that his pain was too deep to be healed with mere words, so they said nothing.

(If only they had continued to sit quietly!) Often, we feel we must say something spiritual and insightful to a hurting friend. Perhaps what he or she needs most is just our presence, showing that we care. Pat answers and trite quotations say much less than empathetic silence and loving companionship.

Suffering drives us back to the basics of faith.

Job 3:11

"Why didn't I die at birth as I came from the womb?"

Job was experiencing extreme physical pain as well as grief over the loss of his family and possessions. He can't be blamed for wishing he were dead. Job's grief placed him at the crossroads of his faith, shattering many misconceptions about God (such as: he makes you rich, always keeps you from trouble and pain, or protects your loved ones).

Job was driven back to the basics of his faith in God. He had only two choices:

- (1) He could curse God and give up, or
- (2) He could trust God and draw strength from him to continue.

Suffering cannot destroy life's purpose.

Job 3:23-26

Why is life given to those with no future, those destined by God to live in distress?

I cannot eat for sighing; my groans pour out like water.

What I always feared has happened to me. What I dreaded has come to be. I have no peace, no quietness. I have no rest; instead, only trouble comes."

Job had been careful not to worship material possessions but to worship God alone. Here he was overwhelmed by calamities that mocked his caution, and he complained about trials that came despite his right living. All the principles by which he had lived were crumbling, and Job began to lose his perspective.

Trials and grief, whether temporary or enduring, do not destroy the real purpose of life.

Life is not given merely for happiness and personal fulfillment, but for us to serve and honor God. The worth and meaning of life is not based on what we feel, but on the one reality no one can take away—God's love for us.

Don't assume that because God truly loves you, he will always prevent suffering. The opposite may be true. God's love cannot be measured or limited by how great or how little we may suffer. Romans 8:38-39 teaches us that nothing can separate us from God's love.

Don't sin as a result of suffering

Job 7:12

Am I a sea monster that you place a guard on me?

Job stopped talking to Eliphaz and spoke directly to God. Although Job had lived a blameless life, he was beginning to doubt the value of living in such a way.

By doing this, he was coming dangerously close to suggesting that God didn't care about him and was not being fair. Later God reproved Job for this attitude (Job 38:2).

Satan always exploits these thoughts to get us to forsake God. Our suffering, like Job's, may not be the result of our sin, but we must be careful not to sin as a result of our suffering.

Suffering caused Job to say things he would regret.

Job 9:20-21

Though I am innocent, my own mouth would pronounce me guilty. Though I am blameless, it would prove me wicked. I am innocent, but it makes no difference to me—I despise my life.

“Even if I were innocent, my mouth would condemn me.” Job was saying, “In spite of my good life, God is determined to condemn me.” As his suffering continued, he became more impatient. Although Job remained loyal to God, he made statements he would later regret. In times of extended sickness or prolonged pain, it is natural for people to doubt, to despair, or to become impatient. During those times, people need someone to listen to them, to help them work through their feelings and frustrations. Your patience with their impatience will help them.

Suffering can lead to self-pity.

Job 10:1

"I am disgusted with my life. Let me complain freely. I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.

Job began to wallow in self-pity. When we face baffling affliction, our pain lures us toward feeling sorry for ourselves. At this point we are only one step from self-righteousness, where we keep track of life's injustices and say, “Look what happened to me; how unfair it is!”

We may feel like blaming God. Remember that life's trials, whether allowed by God or sent by God, can be the means for development and refinement. When facing trials, ask, "What can I learn and how can I grow?" rather than "Who did this to me and how can I get out of it?"

Suffering makes us jump to false conclusions.

Job 10:13-14

'Yet your real motive—I know this was your intent— was to watch me, and if I sinned, you would not forgive my iniquity.

In frustration, Job jumped to the false conclusion that God was out to get him. Wrong assumptions lead to wrong conclusions. We dare not take our limited experiences and jump to conclusions about life in general. If you find yourself doubting God, remember that you don't have all the facts. God wants only the very best for your life. Many people endure great pain, but ultimately they find some greater good came from it. When you're struggling, don't assume the worst.

Chapter 3



Suffering tests our values.

Job 14:22

They are absorbed in their own pain and grief."

Job's profound speech in this chapter illustrates a great truth: to have a right set of doctrines is not enough. To know what to believe is not all that is required to please God. Truth untested by life's experiences may become static and stagnant. Suffering can bring a dynamic quality to life. Just as drought drives the roots of a tree deeper to find water, so suffering can drive us beyond superficial acceptance of truth to dependence on God for hope and life.

Ways to comfort those who are suffering

Job 16:1

Then Job spoke again:

Job's friends were supposed to be comforting him in his grief. Instead they condemned him for causing his own suffering.

Job began his reply to Eliphaz by calling him and his friends "miserable comforters."

Job's words reveal several ways to become a better comforter to those in pain:

- (1) Don't talk just for the sake of talking;
- (2) Don't sermonize by giving pat answers;
- (3) Don't accuse or criticize;
- (4) Put yourself in the other person's place; and
- (5) Offer help and encouragement.

Try Job's suggestions, knowing that they are given by a person who needed great comfort. The best comforters are those who know something about personal suffering.

Psalm 37:25

Once I was young, and now I am old.

Yet I have never seen the godly forsaken, nor seen their children begging for bread.

Because children starve today, as they did in David's time, what did David mean by these words?

David is observing God's provision over a lifetime. Though there are unfortunate exceptions to this general principle, God provides for his own people. The children of the righteous need not go hungry because other believers can help out in their time of need.

In David's day, Israel obeyed God's laws that ensured that the poor were treated fairly and mercifully.

As long as Israel was obedient, there was enough food for everyone. When Israel forgot God, the rich took care only of themselves, and the poor suffered (Amos 2:6-7).

When we see a Christian brother or sister suffering today, we can respond in one of three ways.

(1) We can say, as Job's friends did, that the afflicted person brought this on himself.

(2) We can say that this is a test to help the poor develop more patience and trust in God.

(3) We can help the person in need.

David would approve of only the last option. Although many governments today have their own programs for helping those in need, this is no excuse for ignoring the poor and needy within our reach.

How you react to suffering reflects what you believe.

Job 21:22

"But who can teach a lesson to God, the supreme Judge?"

Although baffled by the reasons for his suffering, Job affirmed God's superior understanding by asking, "Can anyone teach knowledge to God?" The way you respond to your personal struggles shows your attitude toward God.

Rather than becoming angry with God, continue to trust him, no matter what your circumstances may be. Although it is sometimes difficult to see, God *is* in control. We must commit ourselves to him so we will not resent his timing.

Philip. 1:12-14

And I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters that everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News. For everyone here, including all the soldiers in the palace guard, knows that I am in chains because of Christ.

And because of my imprisonment, many of the Christians here have gained confidence and become bolder in telling others about Christ.

Being imprisoned would cause many people to become bitter or to give up, but Paul saw it as one more opportunity to spread the Good News of Christ.

Paul realized that his current circumstances weren't as important as what he did with them. Turning a bad situation into a good one, he reached out to the Roman soldiers who made up the palace guard and encouraged those Christians who were afraid of persecution.

We may not be in prison, but we still have plenty of opportunities to be discouraged—times of indecision, financial burdens, family conflict, church conflict, or the loss of our jobs.

How we act in such situations will reflect what we believe. Like Paul, look for ways to demonstrate your faith even in bad situations. Whether or not the situation improves, your faith will grow stronger.

How did Paul end up in chains in a Roman prison? While he was visiting Jerusalem, some Jews had him arrested for preaching the gospel, but he appealed to Caesar to hear his case (Acts 21:15-25:12).

He was then escorted by soldiers to Rome, where he was placed under house arrest while awaiting trial—not a trial for breaking civil law, but for proclaiming the Good News of Christ.

At that time, the Roman authorities did not consider this to be a serious charge. A few years later, however, Rome would take a different view of Christianity and make every effort to stamp it out of existence.

Paul's house arrest allowed him some degree of freedom. He could have visitors, continue to preach, and write letters such as this one. A brief record of Paul's time in Rome is found in Acts 28:11-31. The "whole palace guard" refers to the Praetorian Guard, the elite troops housed in the emperor's palace.

When we speak fearlessly for Christ, or live faithfully for him during difficult situations, we encourage others to do the same. Be an encouragement by the way that you live.

Elihu's limited view of suffering

Job 32:2

Then was kindled the wrath of Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the kindred of Ram: against Job was his wrath kindled, because he justified himself rather than God.

When Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar had nothing more to say, Elihu became the fourth person to speak to Job.

This was the first and only time he spoke. Apparently he was a bystander and much younger than the others (Job 32:6-7), but he introduced a new viewpoint.

While Job's three friends said he was suffering from some past sins, Elihu said Job's suffering would not go away until he realized his *present* sin.

He maintained that Job wasn't suffering because of sin; he was sinning because of suffering. Elihu pointed out that Job's attitude had become arrogant as he tried to defend his innocence. Elihu also said that suffering is not meant to punish us as much as it is meant to correct and restore us, to keep us on the right path.

There is much truth in Elihu's speech. He was urging Job to look at his suffering from a different perspective and with a greater purpose in mind.

While his speech is on a higher spiritual plateau than the others, Elihu still wrongly assumed that a correct response to suffering always brings healing and restoration (Job 33:23-30) and that suffering is always in some way connected to sin (Job 34:11).

Job's greatest test was that he did not know why he suffered.

Job 33:13

Why dost thou strive against him? For he giveth not account of any of his matters.

Being informed brings a sense of security. It's natural to want to know what's happening in our lives. Job wanted to know what was going on, why he was suffering. In previous chapters, we sense his frustration.

Elihu claimed to have the answer for Job's biggest question, "Why doesn't God tell me what is happening?" Elihu told Job that God was trying to answer him, but he was not listening.

Elihu misjudged God on this point. If God were to answer all our questions, we would not be adequately tested.

What if God had said, "Job, Satan's going to test you and afflict you, but in the end you'll be healed and get everything back"?

Job's greatest test was not the pain, but that he did not know *why* he was suffering.

Our greatest test may be that we must trust God's goodness even though we don't understand why our lives are going a certain way. We must learn to trust in *God* who is good and not in the goodness of life.

Suffering demonstrates our loyalty to God.

Psalm 44:9-22

But now you have tossed us aside in dishonor. You no longer lead our armies to battle. You make us retreat from our enemies and allow them to plunder our land.

You have treated us like sheep waiting to be slaughtered; you have scattered us among the nations.

You sold us—your precious people—for a pittance. You valued us as nothing at all.

You have caused all our neighbors to mock us.
We are an object of scorn and derision to the nations around us.

You have made us the butt of their jokes; we are scorned by the whole world.

We can't escape the constant humiliation; shame is written across our faces.

All we hear are the taunts of our mockers. All we see are our vengeful enemies.

All this has happened despite our loyalty to you.
We have not violated your covenant.

Our hearts have not deserted you. We have not strayed from your path.
Yet you have crushed us in the desert. You have covered us with darkness and death.

If we had turned away from worshiping our God or spread our hands in prayer to foreign gods,

God would surely have known it, for he knows the secrets of every heart.

For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.

Trying to protect loved ones from suffering

Matthew 16:22

Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee.

Peter, Jesus' friend and devoted follower who had just eloquently proclaimed Jesus' true identity, sought to protect him from the suffering he prophesied. But if Jesus hadn't suffered and died, Peter (and we) would have died in his sins.

Great temptations can come from those who love us and seek to protect us. Be cautious of advice from a friend who says, "Surely God doesn't want you to face this." Often our most difficult temptations come from those who are only trying to protect us from discomfort.

Suffering will one day end.

1 Cor. 15:50-53

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption.

Behold, I shew you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

We all face limitations. Those who have physical, mental, or emotional disabilities are especially aware of this. Some may be blind, but they can see a new way to live. Some may be deaf, but they can hear God's Good News.

Some may be lame, but they can walk in God's love. In addition, they have the encouragement that those disabilities are only temporary. Paul tells us that we all will be given new bodies when Christ returns and that these bodies will be without disabilities, never to die or become sick. This can give us hope in our suffering.

“We will not all sleep” means that Christians alive at that day will not have to die but will be transformed immediately. A trumpet blast will usher in the new heaven and earth. The Jews would understand the significance of this because trumpets were always blown to signal the start of great festivals and other extraordinary events (Numbers 10:10).

Rev. 7:17

For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.

God will provide for his children's needs in their eternal home where there will be no hunger, thirst, or pain, and he will wipe away all tears. When you are suffering or torn apart by sorrow, take comfort in this promise of complete protection and relief.

We see the believers receiving a seal to protect them through a time of great tribulation and suffering; in Rev. 7:9-17 we see the believers finally with God in heaven. All who have been faithful through the ages are singing before God's throne.

Their tribulations and sorrows are over: no more tears for sin, for all sins are forgiven; no more tears for suffering, for all suffering is over; no more tears for death, for all believers have been resurrected to die no more.

Identifying with believers in Suffering

Matthew 24:9-13

Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake.

And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another.

And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.

You may not be facing intense persecution now, but Christians in other parts of the world are. As you hear about Christians suffering for their faith, remember that they are your brothers and sisters in Christ. Pray for them. Ask God what you can do to help them in their troubles. When one part suffers, the *whole* body suffers.

But when all the parts join together to ease the suffering, the whole body benefits (1 Cor. 12:26).

2 Cor. 1:3-5

Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.

For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ.

Many think that when God comforts us, our troubles should go away. But if that were always so, people would turn to God only out of a desire to be relieved of pain and not out of love for him.

We must understand that being *comforted* can also mean receiving strength, encouragement, and hope to deal with our troubles. The more we suffer, the more comfort God gives us.

If you are feeling overwhelmed, allow God to comfort you. Remember that every trial you endure will help you comfort other people who are suffering similar troubles.

The “sufferings of Christ” are those afflictions we experience as we do Christ’s ministry. At the same time, Christ suffers with his people, since they are united with him. In Acts 9:4-5 Christ asked Paul why he was persecuting him.

This implies that Christ suffered with the early Christians when they were persecuted.

The great suffering Jesus faced

Matthew 26:39

He went on a little farther and fell face down on the ground, praying, "My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will, not mine."

Again Jesus assured his disciples of victory over death and of their future with him. The next few hours would bring apparent defeat, but soon they would experience the power of the Holy Spirit and witness the great spread of the gospel message. And one day, they would all be together again in God's new kingdom.

Rewards suffering bring

Mark 8:32-33

As he talked about this openly with his disciples, Peter took him aside and told him he shouldn't say things like that.

Jesus turned and looked at his disciples and then said to Peter very sternly, "Get away from me, Satan! You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's."

In this moment, Peter was not considering God's purposes, but only his own natural human desires and feelings. Peter wanted Christ to be king, but not the suffering servant prophesied in Isaiah 53. He was ready to receive the glory of following the Messiah, but not the persecution.

The Christian life is not a paved road to wealth and ease. It often involves hard work, persecution, deprivation, and deep suffering. Peter saw only part of the picture. Don't repeat his mistake. Instead, focus on the good that God can bring out of apparent evil, and the resurrection that follows crucifixion.

Peter was often the spokesman for all the disciples. In singling him out, Jesus may have been addressing all of them indirectly.

Unknowingly, the disciples were trying to prevent Jesus from going to the cross and thus fulfilling his mission on earth. Satan also tempted Jesus to avoid the way of the cross (Matthew 4). Whereas Satan's motives were evil, the disciples were motivated by love and admiration for Jesus.

Nevertheless, the disciples' job was not to guide and protect Jesus, but to follow him. Only after Jesus' death and resurrection would they fully understand why he had to die.

Why Jesus suffered for us

Mark 15:31

The leading priests and teachers of religious law also mocked Jesus. "He saved others," they scoffed, "but he can't save himself!"

Jesus could have saved himself, but he endured this suffering because of his love for us. He could have chosen not to take the pain and humiliation; he could have killed those who mocked him—but he suffered through it all because he loved even his enemies. We had a significant part in the drama that afternoon because our sins were on the cross too.

Jesus died on that cross for us, and the penalty for our sins was paid by his death. The only adequate response we can make is to confess our sin and freely accept the fact that Jesus paid for it so we wouldn't have to. Don't insult God with indifference toward the greatest act of genuine love in history.

Developing a willing attitude about suffering

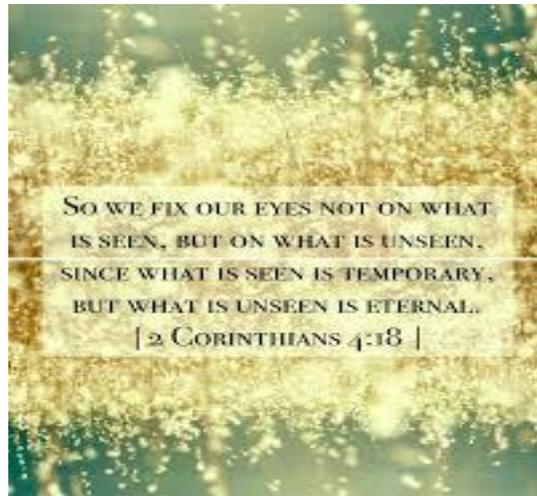
Mark 10:38-39

But Jesus answered, "You don't know what you are asking! Are you able to drink from the bitter cup of sorrow I am about to drink? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism of suffering I must be baptized with?" "Oh yes," they said, "we are able!"

And Jesus said, "You will indeed drink from my cup and be baptized with my baptism,

Jesus constantly turns the world's perspective upside down with talk of first and last, saving and losing. Here he gives us a choice. We can reject Jesus now and be rejected by him at his second coming, or we can accept him now and be accepted by him then. Rejecting Christ may help us escape shame for the time being, but it will guarantee an eternity of shame later.

Chapter 4



God may not protect you from suffering

Luke 21:18

But not a hair of your head will perish!

Jesus was *not* saying that believers would be exempt from physical harm or death during the persecutions. Remember that most of the disciples were martyred. Rather he was saying that none of his followers would suffer spiritual or eternal loss. On earth, everyone will die, but believers in Jesus will be saved for eternal life.

Promises to claim in suffering

Luke 21:26

The courage of many people will falter because of the fearful fate they see coming upon the earth, because the stability of the very heavens will be broken up.

Suffering is not always a result of sin.

John 9:2-3

"Teacher," his disciples asked him, "why was this man born blind? Was it a result of his own sins or those of his parents?"

"It was not because of his sins or his parents' sins," Jesus answered. "He was born blind so the power of God could be seen in him.

A common belief in Jewish culture was that calamity or suffering was the result of some great sin. But Christ used this man's suffering to teach about faith and to glorify God. We live in a fallen world where good behavior is not always rewarded and bad behavior not always punished.

Therefore, innocent people sometimes suffer. If God took suffering away whenever we asked, we would follow him for comfort and convenience, not out of love and devotion. Regardless of the reasons for our suffering, Jesus has the power to help us deal with it. When you suffer from a disease, tragedy, or disability, try not to ask, "Why did this happen to me?" or "What did I do wrong?" Instead, ask God to give you strength for the trial and a clearer perspective on what is happening.

1 Thess. 3:1-3

Finally, when we could stand it no longer, we decided that I should stay alone in Athens, and we sent Timothy to visit you. He is our co-worker for God and our brother in proclaiming the Good News of Christ.

We sent him to strengthen you, to encourage you in your faith, and to keep you from becoming disturbed by the troubles you were going through. But, of course, you know that such troubles are going to happen to us Christians.

Some think that troubles are always caused by sin or a lack of faith. Trials may be a part of God's plan for believers. Experiencing problems and persecutions can build character (James 1:2-4), perseverance (Romans 5:3-5), and sensitivity toward others who also face trouble (2 Cor. 1:3-7). Problems are unavoidable for God's people. Your troubles may be a sign of effective Christian living.

God demonstrates his power through Suffering

2 Cor. 12:9

Each time he said, "My gracious favor is all you need. My power works best in your weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may work through me.

Although God did not remove Paul's physical affliction, he promised to demonstrate his power in Paul. The fact that God's power is displayed in weak people should give us courage.

Though we recognize our limitations, we will not congratulate ourselves and rest at that. Instead, we will turn to God to seek pathways for effectiveness.

We must rely on God for our effectiveness rather than simply on our own energy, effort, or talent. Our weakness not only helps develop Christian character; it also deepens our worship, because in admitting our weakness, we affirm God's strength.

Are you willing to suffer for the gospel?

Acts 5:40-42

The council accepted his advice. They called in the apostles and had them flogged. Then they ordered them never again to speak in the name of Jesus, and they let them go.

The apostles left the high council rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus. And every day, in the Temple and in their homes, they continued to teach and preach this message: "The Messiah you are looking for is Jesus."

Peter and John were warned repeatedly not to preach, but they continued in spite of the threats. We, too, should live as Christ has asked us to, sharing our faith no matter what the cost. We may not be beaten or thrown in jail, but we may be ridiculed, ostracized, or slandered. To what extent are you willing to suffer for the sake of sharing the gospel with others?

Have you ever thought of persecution as a blessing, as something worth rejoicing about? This beating suffered by Peter and John was the first time any of the apostles had been physically abused for their faith. These men knew how Jesus had suffered, and they praised God that he had allowed them to be persecuted like their Lord.

If you are mocked or persecuted for your faith, it isn't because you're doing something wrong, but because God has counted you "worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name."

Home Bible studies are not new. As the believers needed to grow in their new faith, home Bible studies met their needs, as well as serving as a means to introduce new people to the Christian faith.

During later times of persecution, meeting in homes became the primary method of passing on Bible knowledge. Christians throughout the world still use this approach when under persecution and as a way to build up believers.

Why early believers were glad to suffer

Acts 7:60

And he fell to his knees, shouting, "Lord, don't charge them with this sin!" And with that, he died.

As Stephen died, he spoke words very similar to Jesus' words on the cross (Luke 23:34). The early believers were glad to suffer as Jesus had suffered because that meant they were counted worthy (Acts 5:41).

Stephen was ready to suffer like Jesus, even to the point of asking forgiveness for his murderers. Such a forgiving response comes only from the Holy Spirit. The Spirit can also help us respond as Stephen did with love for our enemies (Luke 6:27). How would you react if someone hurt you because of what you believed?

Why does God allow suffering?

Acts 12:2-11

He had the apostle James (John's brother) killed with a sword. [3] When Herod saw how much this pleased the Jewish leaders, he arrested Peter during the Passover celebration and imprisoned him, placing him under the guard of four squads of four soldiers each.

Herod's intention was to bring Peter out for public trial after the Passover. But while Peter was in prison, the church prayed very earnestly for him.

The night before Peter was to be placed on trial, he was asleep, chained between two soldiers, with others standing guard at the prison gate. Suddenly, there was a bright light in the cell, and an angel of the Lord stood before Peter.

The angel tapped him on the side to awaken him and said, "Quick! Get up!" And the chains fell off his wrists. Then the angel told him, "Get dressed and put on your sandals." And he did. "Now put on your coat and follow me," the angel ordered.

So Peter left the cell, following the angel. But all the time he thought it was a vision. He didn't realize it was really happening. They passed the first and second guard posts and came to the iron gate to the street, and this opened to them all by itself. So they passed through and started walking down the street, and then the angel suddenly left him.

Peter finally realized what had happened. "It's really true!" he said to himself. "The Lord has sent his angel and saved me from Herod and from what the Jews were hoping to do to me!"

Why did God allow James to die and yet miraculously save Peter?

Life is full of difficult questions like this.

Why is one child physically disabled and another child athletically gifted?

Why do people die seemingly before realizing their potential?

These are questions we cannot possibly answer in this life because we do not see all that God sees. He has chosen to allow evil in this world for a time. But we can trust God's leading because he has promised to destroy all evil eventually. In the meantime, we know that God will help us use our suffering to strengthen us and glorify him. For more on this question,

How much must believers endure?

Romans 8:17

And since we are his children, we will share his treasures—for everything God gives to his Son, Christ, is ours, too. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering.

There is a price for being identified with Jesus. Along with the great treasures, Paul mentions the suffering that Christians must face. What kinds of suffering are we to endure? For first-century believers, there was economic and social persecution, and some even faced death.

We too must pay a price for following Jesus. In many parts of today's world, Christians face pressures just as severe as those faced by Christ's first followers. Even in countries where Christianity is tolerated or encouraged, Christians must not become complacent. To live as Jesus did—serving others, giving up one's own rights, resisting pressures to conform to the world—always exacts a price. Nothing we suffer, however, can compare to the great price that Jesus paid to save us.

The benefits of suffering

Philip. 1:29

For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him.

Paul considered it a privilege to suffer for Christ. We do not by nature consider suffering a privilege. Yet when we suffer, if we faithfully represent Christ, our message and example affect us and others for good (see Acts 5:41).

Suffering has these additional benefits:

- (1) It takes our eyes off of earthly comforts;
- (2) It weeds out superficial believers;
- (3) It strengthens the faith of those who endure;
- (4) It serves as an example to others who may follow us.

When we suffer for our faith, it doesn't mean that we have done something wrong. In fact, the opposite is often true—it verifies that we have been faithful. Use suffering to build your character. Don't resent it or let it tear you down.

How would Paul's suffering make the Ephesians feel honored?

Ephes. 3:13

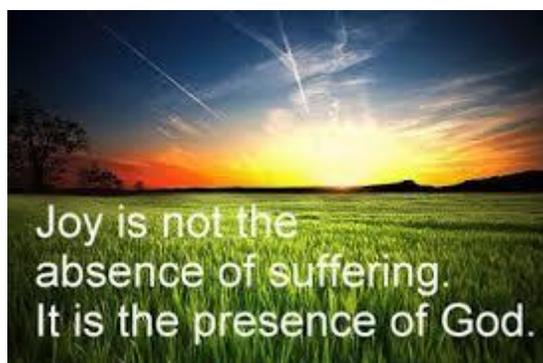
So please don't despair because of what they are doing to me here. It is for you that I am suffering, so you should feel honored and encouraged.

Why should Paul's suffering make the Ephesians feel honored ("which are your glory")? If Paul had not preached the gospel, he would not be in jail—but then the Ephesians would not have heard the Good News and been converted either.

Just as a mother endures the pain of childbirth in order to bring new life into the world, Paul endured the pain of persecution in order to bring new believers to Christ. Obeying Christ is never easy.

He calls you to take up your cross and follow him (Matthew 16:24)—that is, to be willing to endure pain so that God's message of salvation can reach the entire world. We should feel honored that others have suffered and sacrificed for us so that we might reap the benefit.

Chapter 5



Suffering may be a sign of effective living.

1 Thess. 3:4-5

For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know. For this cause, when I could no longer forbear, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter have tempted you, and our labour be in vain.

Some people turn to God with the hope of escaping suffering on earth. But God doesn't promise that. Instead he gives us power to grow through our sufferings. The Christian life involves obedience to Christ despite temptations and hardships.

Satan ("the tempter") is the most powerful of the evil spirits. His power can affect both the spiritual world (Ephes. 2:1-3; Ephes. 6:10-12) and the physical world (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Satan even tempted Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11). But Jesus defeated Satan when he died on the cross for our sins and rose again to bring us new life. At the proper time God will overthrow Satan forever (Rev. 20:7-10).

Patience and faith needed in times of suffering

2 Thess. 1:4

We proudly tell God's other churches about your endurance and faithfulness in all the persecutions and hardships you are suffering.

The keys to surviving persecution and trials are perseverance and faith. When we are faced with crushing troubles, we can have faith that God is using our trials for our good and for his glory.

Knowing that God is fair and just will give us patience in our suffering because we know that he has not forgotten us. In God's perfect timing, he will relieve our suffering and punish those who persecute us. Can you trust God's timing?

Why Jesus' suffering made him a perfect leader.

Hebrews 2:10

And it was only right that God—who made everything and for whom everything was made—should bring his many children into glory. Through the suffering of Jesus, God made him a perfect leader, one fit to bring them into their salvation.

How was Jesus made perfect through suffering? Jesus' suffering made him a perfect leader, or pioneer, of our salvation (see the notes on +Hebrews 5:8 and +Hebrews 5:9).

Jesus did not need to suffer for his own salvation, because he was God in human form. His perfect obedience (which led him down the road of suffering) demonstrates that he was the complete sacrifice for us.

Through suffering, Jesus completed the work necessary for our own salvation. Our suffering can make us more sensitive servants of God. People who have known pain are able to reach out with compassion to others who hurt. If you have suffered, ask God how your experience can be used to help others.

Why Jesus can identify with our suffering.

Hebrews 2:18

Since he himself has gone through suffering and temptation, he is able to help us when we are being tempted.

Knowing that Christ suffered pain and faced temptation helps us face our trials. Jesus understands our struggles because he faced them as a human being. We can trust Christ to help us survive suffering and overcome temptation.

When you face trials, go to Jesus for strength and patience. He understands your needs and is able to help (see Hebrews 4:14-16).

Why we choose to endure suffering at times

Hebrews 5:7

While Jesus was here on earth, he offered prayers and pleadings, with a loud cry and tears, to the one who could deliver him out of death. And God heard his prayers because of his reverence for God.

Jesus was in great agony as he prepared to face death (Luke 22:41-44). Although Jesus cried out to God, asking to be delivered, he was prepared to suffer humiliation, separation from his Father, and death in order to do God's will. At times we will undergo trials, not because we want to suffer, but because we want to obey God. Let Jesus' obedience sustain and encourage you in times of trial. You will be able to face anything if you know that Jesus Christ is with you.

Have you ever felt that God didn't hear your prayers? Be sure you are praying with reverent submission, willing to do what God wants. God responds to his obedient children.

Expect suffering

James 1:2-3

Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow.

James doesn't say *if* you face trials, but *whenever* you face them. He assumes that we will have trials and that it is possible to profit from them. The point is not to pretend to be happy when we face pain, but to have a positive outlook ("consider it pure joy") because of what trials can produce in our lives. James tells us to turn our hardships into times of learning. Tough times can teach us perseverance.

Chapter 6



Sin loses its power when we suffer.

1 Peter 4:1-2

Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm you likewise with the same mind: for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin; that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God.

Some people will do anything to avoid pain. As followers of Christ, however, we should be willing and prepared to do God's will and to suffer for it if necessary. Sin loses its power to defeat us in our suffering if we focus on Christ and what he wants us to do.

When our bodies are in pain or our lives are in jeopardy, our real values show up clearly, and sinful pleasures seem less important. If anyone suffers for doing good and still faithfully obeys in spite of suffering, that person has made a clean break with sin.

Never shameful to suffer for Christ

1 Peter 4:16

Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.

It is not shameful to suffer for being a Christian. When Peter and John were persecuted for preaching the Good News, they rejoiced because such persecution was a mark of God's approval of their work (Acts 5:41).

Don't seek out suffering, and don't try to avoid it. Instead, keep on doing what is right regardless of the suffering it might bring.

Don't let suffering drive you away from God.

Rev. 2:9-11

I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.

Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

What suffering can teach us

James 1:4

But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.

We can't really know the depth of our character until we see how we react under pressure. It is easy to be kind to others when everything is going well, but can we still be kind when others are treating us unfairly? God wants to make us mature and complete, not to keep us from all pain. Instead of complaining about our struggles, we should see them as opportunities for growth.

Thank God for promising to be with you in rough times. Ask him to help you solve your problems or to give you the strength to endure them. Then be patient. God will not leave you alone with your problems; he will stay close and help you grow.

Any reasons for suffering

1 Peter 2:21-22

For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth:

We may suffer for many reasons. Some suffering is the direct result of our own sin; some happens because of our foolishness; and some is the result of living in a fallen world. Peter is writing about suffering that comes as a result of doing good.

Christ never sinned, and yet he suffered so that we could be set free. When we follow Christ's example and live for others, we too may suffer. Our goal should be to face suffering as he did—with patience, calmness, and confidence that God is in control of the future.

Peter learned about suffering from Jesus.

1 Peter 2:23-25

Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, Which we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.

For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

Peter had learned about suffering from Jesus. He knew that Jesus' suffering was part of God's plan (Matthew 16:21-23; Luke 24:25-27, 44-47) and was intended to save us (Matthew 20:28; Matthew 26:28).

He also knew that all who follow Jesus must be prepared to suffer (Mark 8:34-35). Peter learned these truths from Jesus and passed them on to us.

References:

Holy Bible: New Living Bible translation.

Additional comments and charts are taken from:

***Life Application Study Bible*. Illinois: Tyndale House 2007. Print**

