

Rhythms of Grace: Enduring Suffering

I. Suffering is good for us

Suffering is pain that comes upon us for a variety of reasons, including the brokenness of the world, our sin, and the sin of others.

Psalm 119:67, 71

Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word.

It is good for me that I was afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes.

Suffering is good for us because it reminds us what is important and causes us to need to rely on God and His Word. Unfortunately, most of us, if we just get whatever we want, end up living self-indulgent lives. Suffering is a part of God's kind discipline for us to teach us not to live for self.

II. Suffering is not outside of God's sovereign care

Job 1:12, 20-21

Then the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him." So Satan departed from the presence of the Lord.

Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped. He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. blessed be the name of the Lord."

Ultimately, because God is the one who brought our suffering, He is the one who can take it away. Satan isn't sovereign over our pain, God is. And while on the surface it doesn't seem comforting to know that God brought pain into our lives, ultimately it is God's sovereignty over our pain that gives it ultimate meaning. Not one tear will be wasted and God will only bring into our lives that which is good for us.

III. Discussion: When suffering comes, what lies are we tempted to believe?

IV. Suffering shows us where our hope lies

Romans 5:3-5

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Paul actually says that we boast in tribulations here. Why? Because tribulations produce perseverance, character, and hope. We boast because of what we know. In other words, seeing the purpose of our trials causes us to embrace the goodness in them. Understanding their purpose totally reframes how we go through suffering.

Learning to endure in trial is good for us. That is what builds character in us. If sin is seeking instant gratification over long lasting satisfaction (and it is), then learning to endure, and not just do what our flesh wants, is what character is. And the more character we have, the more we see that this life is empty and our hope is in eternity. And so suffering actually helps our perspective be on eternity, which is what causes us to have unshakable character.

V. Suffering reminds us of the weight of spiritual glory

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. 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.

In a similar way, here Paul tells us that suffering is light and momentary compared to glory. No matter how long or how strong our trial is, it's nothing compared to glory. And knowing that changes how we go through life. In fact, the suffering actually produces glory. It gives us a longing and taste for what is eternal. When things are good it is so easy to be focused on earthly things, but suffering makes us long for eternity. And so Paul contrasts our inner and outer man. Suffering is part of our outer man decaying, but it is part of our inner man being renewed every day. Suffering causes us to live in light of eternity and value what is unseen and spiritual.

VI. Suffering refines us by removing every kind of idol

James 1:2-4

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

A. God doesn't want us to short circuit our trials

James says that we should count our trials nothing but joy. Trials are not just part good and part bad, they are nothing but joy. That is how we should think about them. We should actually jump for joy when trials come. Why? Once again it is not for the trial in itself, as if we are sadists or love pain. But we consider trials all joy for what they produce. It's because once again, we know their purpose in God's design.

James tells us that we don't plan when trials come, we just fall into them. They are like a pit that we get trapped in. So these aren't easy trials that James is talking about. They seem like we can't get out of them. And the trials are 'multi-colored'. That means that we don't just get one kind of trial, but many. What is the purpose of these all encompassing trials of every kind? God purposefully gives us all different kinds of trials because he wants us to be mature in every area of our lives.

So God calls us to let endurance have its complete effect. In other words, don't short circuit your trial. Don't be so eager to get out of it that you miss the purpose of it. Don't be so focused on your own pain that you compromise to hit the eject button. Now that doesn't mean that if there is a godly way out of your trial, you should stay in it just to experience more pain. But it does mean that when there is a trial there is such a temptation to get out of it in an ungodly way, but God calls us to let the trial accomplish its purpose in our lives.

B. God's goal is our maturity through our suffering

By giving us trials in every part of our life, God is making us mature and complete, lacking in nothing. God wants to bring all these different kinds of trials into our lives to mature us in every kind of way. That is the goal, God is shaping us to make us like Jesus. And that is worth going through the trial with joy!

For example, if we have an idol of money, guess what God wants to do? Give us a money trial to show how we were trusting in and loving money. If we have an idol of comfort, guess what? God gives us a trial in the area of our comfort to expose our hearts. Control idol? Fear of man idol? God gives us variegated, multicolored trials because He wants us refined in every area of life. Like a master sculptor who is chiseling away at rock, God chisels away at our lives to form us into the people He wants us to be.

VII. Discussion: When we are suffering, how should we think about how our own sin plays a part?

VIII. Suffering proves that our faith is genuine

1 Peter 1:5-9

...who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.

Peter begins by telling us how great our inheritance is that is waiting in heaven for us. So we rejoice in our salvation. And because of that salvation, we rejoice, even though now we may go through a little suffering. Like Paul, Peter knows that our suffering is brief compared to eternity. But notice those two little words "if necessary." The question is, necessary from whose standpoint? Suffering isn't necessary from our standpoint, it is necessary from God's. In other words, God only puts us through suffering that is necessary to achieve the goal of refining our faith.

Trials prove that our faith is genuine. Not only does fire refine gold, it is also how gold is tested. You purify the gold and then weigh it and you can know if there was any dross or anything fake in it. In the same way, when we keep trusting God even when it is hard, it shows that our faith is genuine, that it is real. When we are getting all the blessings of following God, it's hard to tell if we are following God for God Himself or for what we get out of Him. But faith is trusting God for God. So trials actually show us and everyone around us that what we love and trust is God Himself. And what could be more valuable than proving that, than showing our faith is real? Nothing. So proving that faith is genuine is the goal, that when Christ comes again He gets all the glory and praise.

IX. Discussion: How have you experienced God's goodness in refining your faith?

X. Suffering practiced is how we grow mature like Jesus

Hebrews 5:7-14

In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

A. Jesus learned obedience through suffering

This passage makes some astonishing statements about Jesus. It says that he learned obedience. How is that possible? Wasn't Jesus perfect? Yes, of course He was. But the text is clear, Jesus learned obedience.

So we know that Jesus never disobeyed, He never did anything wrong. But that doesn't mean that Jesus didn't grow, and didn't mature in His obedience. In other words, Jesus wasn't ready as a 5 year old to willingly and joyfully go to the cross to bear the sins and guilt of the world and have the Father's wrath poured out on Him. He had to learn obedience to get to that point.

It's just like in math. You could imagine a child that always got 100% on every math test they ever took. They never missed a problem. But they don't start in 1st grade doing multi-variable calculus. They have to learn to get to that point. But as they learn, they perfectly pass every test. That is Jesus. He never failed any test, any time there was a choice between selfishness and pleasing God, He always chose pleasing God. But He didn't start with the hardest test the world has ever faced. He had to grow to get to that point.

But the point of this text is how did Jesus grow to get to that point? He learned obedience through the things that He suffered. Suffering is what matured Him. In other words, He learned how to obey God in increasingly more difficult trials. And so, when He reached maturity, He became the source of eternal salvation. In other words, when He finally reached the goal of maturity, He went to the cross and passed the final test and saved the world.

B. So we too mature by practicing God's truth even when hard

i. Being immature means not knowing and applying all God calls us to

But in 11-14 the author wants to apply this truth about how Jesus learned to the hearers. Because unfortunately, they had become dull of hearing. This means that they were sluggish, they were slow in obeying and following God. They weren't eager to obey. The author rebukes them that by this time they ought to be teachers, they should have matured to the level of helping others, and yet they were still at the level of needing milk, the basics of the gospel.

The author is making an analogy about physical maturity to spiritual maturity. The person who only drinks milk is an infant, he is not accustomed to the word of righteousness. The word unaccustomed means untested. Ignorance is bliss. The baby Christian doesn't even know what God is calling them to, they are just focused on the basics.

ii. Being mature means putting in effort to consuming and exercising God's Word

But solid food is for the mature. This word 'mature' is the same word used about Jesus. Here is where the author is showing us how to be mature like Christ. It is through practice or skill. Maturity comes from putting the Word of God into practice. The author says that being mature comes through training your senses to discern between good and evil. In other words, it takes hard work to become mature. Literally, the word train means going to the gym. Just like you won't become physically strong and fit by sitting on the couch, in the same way you won't become spiritually mature by sitting on the couch. You have to train your senses to love what is good over what is easy. You have to put in the hard work to choose what God wants over what you want in increasingly more selfless circumstances.

You can never become mature by just gaining head knowledge. You see clearly in this passage that both knowledge of the Word (solid food), and exercising that knowledge (constant practice, training), are required. Just like a great athlete can't eat junk food, but also needs to exercise, spiritual maturity comes through really studying and knowing the Word, and then with a greater understanding of all that God is calling us to, putting that knowledge to practice by faith in increasingly more difficult circumstances, training our senses the love what God loves over just our fleshly desires.

XI. Discussion: How does the example of Jesus press us into mature faith to obey when it is hard?

XII. Suffering displays the sacrificial love of Christ

Colossians 1:24

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

Paul says he fills up what is lacking in Christ's suffering. What could possibly be lacking in Christ? Those words don't seem like they should ever be put together. Obviously, the cross was sufficient. So what was lacking in Christ's suffering? The present application of that suffering to people today.

When Jesus was here on earth, He sacrificially loved and ultimately laid down His life for us. But now He is in heaven. He is completely unable to suffer anymore. So how can the world experience Jesus' selfless and sacrificial love? We are His body. We are the body of Christ. Jesus is the head. And so we as the body of Christ are able to make Christ's sufferings present for people. We make His love tangible.

That's why Paul fills up in suffering. He rejoices in suffering. Because suffering allows you to show love in a way that isn't otherwise possible. You can say to someone, I love you so much I would die for you. But those are just words. Actually laying down your life sacrificially for a person is what makes those words real.

XIII. Discussion: How have you seen the sacrificial love of Jesus in another believer?

XIV. Small Group Questions:

- How does knowing God's purposes in our suffering help us to endure and embrace it by faith?
- When have you experienced the sacrificial care of another believer and how did that minister God's love to you? How does this make you want to lay down your life for people?
- How do we want to put into practice following Jesus into maturity? What do we learn about obeying God even when it is hard?
- What about Diana's and/or Noemi's testimony encourages or challenge us to embrace God's purpose in suffering by faith?