

THE COUNSELOR

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Suffering

Everyone suffers. It's unavoidable in this world. Parents lose children. Parents die young. Divorce



tears families apart. People live with terrible addictions and diseases. We pray for healing and people die painfully. Many live with the trauma of physical, emotional and sexual

abuse. Betrayal, abandonment and misery caused by spouses, loved ones, and friends continues. People are persecuted, tortured, and martyred for their faith. Hatred and prejudice prevail. Holocausts bring horrible pain, suffering and sorrows. Suffering goes on and on. It seems endless in this world. Suffering is one of the greatest mysteries of all. Many great thinkers, philosophers, and religious people have tried to address this issue. Why is there suffering? Why do righteous people suffer? What is the cause, meaning and purpose of suffering? What are we supposed to do with it? How do we live victoriously with suffering as Christians?

Why Does God Allow Suffering?

Answers. We don't have to live in discouragement and despair with the sorrows this life brings. We don't have to remain in our grief and sorrows; overcome and defeated by them. There are answers. Now. The complete mystery of suffering will eventually be revealed and understood when we meet God face to face. We have more than enough to go on, living this life with freedom, hope, humility, power, and love - no matter what!

The God of the Bible is the Creator of Heaven, Earth, and mankind. God is Perfect, Purposeful, and Sovereign. Nothing is a mystery to Him. God is Love and He is Good. God did not create us without a plan for our lives. He knew life in this world would involve suffering after the fall - when sin entered the human race. God clearly lays out His existence, involvement, and plans for humanity in His Word, the Bible. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ to redeem us from eternal death. Jesus came to earth, lived, taught, healed, died, and was resurrected. He will return. Jesus promised us trouble in this life (John 16:33) and offered us assurance that we can live this life as over comers - no matter what. We know "that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." (Rom. 8:28) So, suffering happens because we live in a fallen world and God is sovereign. He knows all about suffering, He allows and uses it for His Higher purposes. Those two answers don't seem to be enough to ease the terrible pain of suffering. Something's missing. They are true and make sense, but there must be more. The Lord could have set up the whole human race without suffering from start to finish in this life, but He didn't. Why not? Why did He allow the possibility of suffering from the beginning? Now we are getting deeper. He gave man the choice to love and obey Him or not from the beginning. We are not puppets. So He created Adam and Eve knowing they would not chose wisely. They would chose sin. They would chose self. Free choice enters the picture as another partial answer for suffering. But there is more, so much more. Could God have woven, creation, choice, sin, suffering, salvation, and sanctification into His Master Plan? Does God use suffering to teach us Agape Love? We shall see.

Job

The Book of Job addresses the question of why righteous men suffer. It demonstrates God's sovereignty and the meaning of faith. It's divided into five parts. Job is tested (Chapters 1:1-2:13); Three friends answer Job (Chapters 3:1-31:40); A young man answers Job (Chapters 32:1-37:24); God answers Job (Chapters 38:1-41:34)



and Job is restored. (Chapters 42:1-17) Job, a wealthy upright man loses all his possessions, his children, and his health. Job was deeply disturbed over the meaning of his suffering. He defended his integrity to his friends who asserted he must have sinned to suffer like that. Job hated his hardships but accepted them, he never blamed God. Remember what he said when his wife looked at his pitiful condition and told him to curse God and die? "But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?" (Job 2:10) Job was an amazing man of God. Job did the following when he was told all his children were dead: Then Job arose, tore his robe, and shaved his head; and he fell to the ground and worshiped. And he said: " Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD." Can you imagine that? This man loses everything, he worships God and does not blame the Lord for his calamities! The Bible says in Job 1:22, that "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong." Job's rock solid faith also came out in Chapter 13 verse 15 when he said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him. Even so, I will defend my own ways before Him."

What are we supposed to learn about suffering from the book of Job? First, we see a man of God who trusts God and accepts adversity even though he does not understand it. We know that there must be an explanation for suffering but we may not get the reasons here on earth. We must always be ready for suffering. Job teaches us that understanding the cause of suffering is less important than knowing God and trusting Him in our reaction to suffering. We also learn a few things about Satan in the book of Job. The devil is

accountable to God. All angelic beings must present themselves before God. God knows the devil's intentions. He knew that Satan wanted Job. Satan is not omnipresent. He can only be at one place at a time. Satan is a created being who cannot read our minds or predict our future. Otherwise the devil would have seen that Job would not renounce God. Satan cannot do anything without God's permission. God restricts the devil. God will only let him go so far. Job's friends were not much help. The young man did better than the others in trying to explain things and comfort Job, but was still off base. God never tells Job that his troubles came because He let Satan test Job's faith. He answers Job with questions about the Lord's Creation and where was Job when God did these marvelous things. God is sovereign. He does what He wants, when He wants, for His own reasons. This may seem cold and harsh but we must trust that God's Purposes are always good, no matter what. God is Love. (1John 4:8)

The Suffering Servant

Jesus knows all about suffering. Isaiah 52:13-53:12 prophesied and described the Suffering Servant. And He came. The four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) address the birth, life, purpose, message, miracles, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. The Messianic prophecies were fulfilled. Jesus suffered as the blood atonement for our sins. We



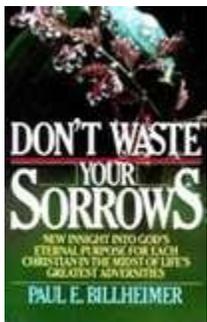
serve a God who understands human suffering! The Chief Sufferer of all time! The God-Man suffered for us. He was perfect and righteous. The Passover Lamb without blemish. Jesus is the embodiment of all suffering. Our Savior suffered more than we will ever suffer. He bore the sins of the world, He became sin for us! He is our definition and example of suffering. He endured the cross for the supreme purpose of saving our souls. He is also the supreme definition of unconditional love, Agape Love. We should always keep Jesus in mind when we try to understand the mystery of suffering. We see the God-Man suffer for a purpose. We see how He did it and why. Suffering is built into God's Ultimate Plan for us. He suffered to save us. We become more like Him through our sufferings. The Suffering Servant gives us instructions on how to

live a victorious life full of heartache pain, sorrows and suffering.

The Christian Life and Suffering

We must embrace suffering as Christians. We suffer on many levels. Suffering comes from external and internal sources. It results from things people do to us and from our own choices. The common denominator is sin. Both external and internal sinful choices and behaviors produce suffering. We suffer **with** and **for** God. Suffering **with** God involves living in a fallen world where internal and external sources precipitate the suffering. Jesus completed His suffering here on earth but He is touched by our hardships. He feels our pain, thus He suffers with us. The more we live out our lives as Christians the more we understand the sufferings with Christ. We identify with our Savior. He suffered, we suffer. We suffer because He suffered. John 15:18 says, "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. Paul eloquently describes this hunger for Christ, being identified with Him and striving for deeper intimacy with Him: "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death." (Phil. 3:10) The more suffering we experience, the more Christ-like we become. Suffering for God involves persecution. Suffering in this world makes us more Christ-like. There's no way out but through. As we embrace suffering in this world, we embrace Christ! It's God's Plan.

We should always believe God for healing. He is still in the healing business. Pray believing that God is able and willing to heal you or someone else. Pray to the end if need be, believing God for a miraculous healing. Sometimes God does not heal people. They suffer. The physical and emotional pain lingers. People die even though Believers prayed for healing. Does that mean the afflicted ones or praying Believers didn't have enough faith? Certainly not. The most devout Believers suffer illnesses to the end. They are not second class Christians. Paul



Billheimer's book *"Don't Waste Your Sorrows"* is the best book I ever read on this subject. He covers this difficult topic extremely well, offering a powerfully fresh explanation on the purpose for suffering and challenges us not to waste our sorrows. Billheimer says, "Must one who is not

healed suffer with a sense of spiritual inferiority and the disappointing suspicion that he can have only God's second best while a select minority who are healed and blessed with affluence pass as "God's chosen few." Or is it possible for the great majority who remain financially limited or physically afflicted to make as great a contribution to the kingdom and bring as much joy to the heart of God and win as great an eternal reward as those who are favored with supernatural deliverance here and now?"² We will look at this more in the next section.

Let's go back to Job for a moment. Job defended His righteousness before his friends but not before God. God begins talking in Job Chapter 38. He goes on for a while asking Job all kinds of questions. Then in Chapter 40, God says, " "Shall the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him? He who rebukes God, let him answer it." (Job 40:2) Job responds and says "Behold, I am vile; What shall I answer You? I lay my hand over my mouth. Once I have spoken, but I will not answer; Yes, twice, but I will proceed no further." (Job 40:4-5) Then God challenges Job again in the same chapter, verse 7, saying "Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me: God speaks again for another two chapters before Job repents, saying "I know that You can do everything, And that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You. You asked, 'Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Listen, please, and let me speak; You said, 'I will question you, and you shall answer Me.' "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, But now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, And repent in dust and ashes." Basically Job gets the sovereignty of God, he relents and repents. Even though Job did not sin to cause his sufferings, I believe he took his defense proclamation of innocence and righteousness too far. He knew he was righteous and questioned why this happened? Is it wrong to vent our anger, frustration and sadness to God? We must always remember God is Good and that He is sovereign. We must not remain stuck in our anger and sorrows. God understands our sufferings, sorrows, and anger. Don't go too far and too long in holding hard feelings toward God about your sufferings. He loves you and will not punish you for verbalizing your feelings toward Him about your situation. Just don't linger there. It's counterproductive. He can handle your anger, but He does not want you to let

the sun go down on it.

Endurance, Blessing, Restoration

Going Deeper

Suffering brings the greatest opportunities to know Jesus Christ. To grow and mature as Believers.

Nothing compares to the character building and rewards that Christians receive when they endure

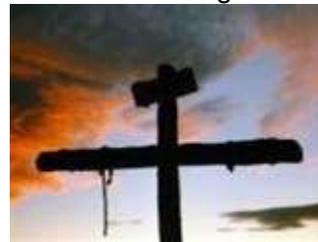


the sufferings of this life through Christ! God uses suffering to mature saints. He trains us through suffering. There is no greater way to overcome the self than through suffering. Paul Billheimer emphasizes

this point: "Because tribulation is necessary for the decentralization of self and the development of deep dimensions of agape love, this love can be developed only in the school of suffering. It grows and develops only by exercise and testing. This may explain the relationship between sainthood and suffering by showing why there is no sainthood without suffering."³ "All born-again people are training for rulership. Since the supreme law of that future social order, called the kingdom of God, is agape love, therefore their apprenticeship and training is for the learning of deep dimensions of love. But dimensions of this love are only learned in the school of suffering. Even after the new birth and filling with the Holy Spirit, which are only beginning experiences, greater dimensions of this love are developed only by exercise and testing. Purity is one thing and maturity is another. The latter comes only through years of suffering. "If we suffer, we will also reign" - because where there is little suffering, there is little love; no suffering, no love; no love, no rulership."⁴ 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 says "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal." Our afflictions are temporary and are abundantly preparing and producing and achieving for us an everlasting weight of glory. Nothing compares to what's ahead and results from our fleeting sufferings in this world. Glory!⁵ Christians suffer debilitating, catastrophic losses, sorrow, and pain. Many seek healing and it does not come. They sink

into self-pity, depression, and hopelessness. Billheimer contends that remaining in discouragement, resentment and defeat is a "wasting of their sorrows."⁶ How many times have you met troubles and sorrows in this life and held on too long, to the point of bitterness, resentment, depression and sorrow. It's perfectly acceptable to grieve the losses and react with shock, anger, frustration and sadness over tragedies, disappointments and betrayals. God understands. He does not want you and I to remain immobilized, stuck, slaves to pain and suffering. He does not want us to waste our sorrows. He wants us to seek, trust and abide in Him. He wants you to bring yourself and your suffering to Him. Let Him.

The Invisible God is our Creator and Lord of the Universe. All that is visible comes from Him. He is Invisible and Eternal. All that we see (the visible) is passing away; this life and our pain. God's invisible glorious kingdom will never perish. We must look to the Invisible God, the Lord Jesus Christ our Savior. We must see, trust, and experience Him through the eyes of our faith in Him, no matter what! Saints throughout the Bible did. Saints throughout all history have. For example, take Moses: "By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible." (Hebrews 11:27). He saw past his pain and circumstances. There are many examples of faith in Hebrews, Chapter 11. Jesus is the ultimate example of faith. In fact, Jesus takes this whole issue of suffering to the highest level. We see this



in Hebrews 12:2: "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the

right hand of the throne of God." This is powerful! Jesus looked into the future, past the horrible suffering he would and did face. He looked at the future glorious results of His suffering - Salvation for all! We should do the same. The joy set before us, the invisible results from our real invisible God, can be seen through the eyes of our faith. The joy comes from seeing the results of our suffering. We believe and see by faith the Eternal Glory to Christ, and our Eternal rewards. We reap deeper intimacy, more agape love, and God's holiness perfected in us!

Epilogue

Are you suffering today? Have you been immobilized in your sadness and sorrows for so long? Do you feel numb and ineffective as a Christian? You want to move forward, but every time you try, the memories and pain related to your loss overwhelm you. Are you wasting your sorrows? I am not minimizing the suffering and pain you are going through today. I want to come along side you and help you go deeper in your understanding about suffering. I want you to lean into Christ and let Him comfort and restore you to complete wholeness. Let Him perfect you. Let Him bless you into blessing others who are suffering. He wants you to use your sufferings to help others. He does not want you to miss out on your eternal rewards for enduring your cross set before you. Pour out your heart to Jesus Christ! Seek Him daily. Let Him decentralize the self within you. Abide in His Glorious Love. Eat and drink His Word Daily. Let your suffering produce a hunger for Him that never stops. He will fill you with His "Living Water" You will be satisfied for awhile, then you will thirst again. We go from filling to filling as we hunger for the Lord. Filled but wanting more. He will give you more of Him each time. Keep knocking. Keep asking. Go deeper. You will find as you go through this process that your suffering has shown you His agape love, every time. Don't give up, don't waste your sorrows. Use them. Your testimony on suffering through Christ will draw many to Him. Your life wrapped in His agape love will produce amazing results!

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F.Y.I.

Steve Rossi, M.A. L.P.C.
THE CHRISTIAN COUNSELOR



9525 Katy Freeway
Suite 311
Houston, TX 77024
713.395.1555

SPEAKING

ENGAGEMENTS

INFO: 713.395.1555

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