

The Gift of Suffering

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Updated July 30, 2017

Introduction

I wrote this paper twenty years ago, after a devastating event which I won't go into. We all have our tragedies, and trauma can be pretty subjective. I wrote this for myself, to help me work through my emotions: they ran the gamut from grief for the loss, to rage against God, to a fit of depression. Finally, I came to terms with what had happened. The journey wasn't easy. It never is.

What I was feeling wasn't unusual; but emotions still need to be tempered by the truth of God. Otherwise they can become destructive. So, in this paper I consider what the Bible has to say about suffering, and also what it has to say about God's love, Christ's sacrifice, and needing the family of God to help me walk through my pain and grief. I wrote it all down. And every few years I come back to revisit it, to remind myself of what's true, and what matters in the end.

Why do that? Because *the testing of our faith* is a constant in the Christian life. Each test, each trial, comes by adversity; and adversity brings suffering in its wake. It's been said that we've either just come out of a trial, or we're now in a trial, or we're headed for a trial. That means another devastating event awaits me down the road. When it comes, I want to be ready for it, in my heart as well as my mind. I won't be able to read this paper in the midst of it. I'll need comfort more than a reminder of God's truth. That's because, in the midst of it, that truth will be drowned out by the screams of my pain. And bringing that truth to me, demanding that I believe it in *place* of my pain, is going to feel like salt in an open wound: medicinal perhaps, but unwelcome.

I've got to read this *before* that event, to prepare myself for it. I need to steel my flesh against the agony to come. Or I've got to read this long *after* that event takes place, *after* the scar forms in my soul: to remedy my brokenness, to comfort my soul, and to reconcile me to God. Paul recounts his own scars in 2Corinthians 11.23-28. He numbers among these traumas, his "deep concern for all the churches." He foolishly boasts in his infirmities, pointing to the marks of Christ in his flesh, glorifying the Holy One who first suffered for him. In Christ, Paul was lifted up to the third heaven, where these momentary afflictions faded away. And yet, there remained this *thorn* in his flesh, to *test* him, and to lovingly *remind* him that God's grace is sufficient for him (2Cor 12.7). In the moment of tragedy, it must be sufficient for me as well.

I tweak this paper from time to time. But to be honest, I'm never fully satisfied with it. Suffering isn't any easier for me to bear after reading this. And there's a good reason for that. As I said, in the midst of my trial, I don't need *truth* about Christ; I need *Christ himself*. Yes, I know I can't have one without the other. But even so, I need the person of Jesus Christ, my Lord, my Savior, and my Friend – the one who understands and sympathizes with what I'm going through. I don't want mere descriptions of him. I want to *experience Christ*. I want him there *with me* in that fiery furnace. "Lo, I am with you always." I *need* that to be true in the very hour of my need.

What this paper *can* do for me (and perhaps for you) is to help me look for Christ there, in the flames — to know that I'm not alone when my pain shuts out everything and everyone else in my life. Even then, in the screaming darkness, I need to know that I'm not apart from him, that in fact, I'm closest to him then. I pray each trauma will draw me nearer, and not drive me away...

The Presence of Suffering Doesn't Deny the Reality of God

Suffering is a constant issue in the Church. The world uses suffering to prove God doesn't exist, or that He is uncaring, unjust, fickle, or downright malicious. For many of God's people, suffering tears at their faith, depleting their energy and joy. It can lead to bitterness and despair. For those whose suffering includes severe physical pain, it's a never-ending reminder that peace with God in our spirit may not include commensurate peace in our body. And so, we make an uneasy friend of our pain, with no other benefit of friendship than its presence. We may savor and even glorify our pain, emotional as well as physical, turning it into a badge of honor to parade before the world. We rehearse it, and prick at it to be sure it's still there, as if affirming our own existence by it.

We have those in the church who, with theological precision, remind us that God has given us this suffering, and we need to accept it as part of our faith. "Endure it," they say, little knowing what they're asking of us. Others rub salt in the wound with their smiling conviction that it will work out for the best. "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." (Rom 8.28^{ESV}) That's a profound truth, but it's not encouraging in our hour of suffering. Timing is everything. "Singing cheerful songs to a person with a heavy heart is like taking someone's coat in cold weather or pouring vinegar in a wound." (Pro 25.20^{NLT}) There are believers who split the Deity in two, telling us that Job was mistaken when he said, "the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away." They reject the very idea that suffering is from God. And so they say, "The Lord giveth, *Satan* taketh away." Suffering in their view is either punishment from God which we deserve, or oppression from the devil which we do *not* deserve, and shouldn't put up with.

Then there are the wiser and more experienced brethren who simply sit down and suffer with us, with no commentary on the side. They have been through something akin to what we are going through. They were comforted by others and know the blessing to be had if they will only look up instead of down. They have learned to stand on the word of God:

³ Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. (2Co 1.3-5^{NAS})

They know that comfort isn't just commiseration. It isn't just saying, "I know how you feel." It isn't sharing our own instances of suffering as if competing for the best tale of woe. There is comfort in letting the person who's enduring the trial, who cannot see past the pain, whose whole world is now filled with suffering, know that *there will be an end to it*. There is hope! A new dawn is coming, as surely as this present night has engulfed them in its momentary affliction:

¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ 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 (2Co 4.16-18^{NAS}).

Responding to Suffering: to what end?

We need to learn how to handle suffering in a way that strengthens rather than diminishes our faith and trust in God. We're not merely to *endure* suffering. We're not to *ignore* suffering. We're not to *repress* suffering. We're not to *evade* suffering. We're to *embrace* our suffering with joy, and with the conviction that it is A GIFT FROM GOD. It's a portal that we must pass through if we are to fully identify with Christ – who suffered undeservedly, but willingly, for our sakes. And it's something that we need to bring before God in prayer, with thanksgiving and humility.

Few of us can do that the first time we encounter personal suffering. It takes our breath away. It shatters our world and staggers us with grief. It may mean an irretrievable rather than a temporary loss, and so it isn't something we're going to get over in time. It takes a patient heart to wait out the lesson to be learned, or the benefit to be derived, if such a lesson or benefit is ever discovered at all. How do we thank God for taking our child's life, striking our spouse with cancer, or ending our life's work? The answer is simple, but it isn't easy. *We cling to Christ alone and not to anyone or anything else.* And we bear the grief in silence rather than under protest. *“This happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God, who raises the dead.” (2Cor.1.9)*

When suffering enters our life, it's like being stripped naked on a public stage. It is a sudden and devastating invasion of privacy. We're catapulted from a sanctuary, into a field of conflict. We all have an innate desire to fill our world with “me and mine,” to draw our things and our family around us in a kind of insulated cocoon. We want to be warm and cozy by the fire, while winter blows its cold wind somewhere outside. Conflict, despair, and suffering are things we'd prefer to happen to other people. We want to control the gates of our self-made havens, barring entrance to such unwelcome guests. God sometimes needs to storm those gates. We're not supposed to be warm and cozy in front of the fire! He demands to know what we're doing there! Who gave us permission to leave the field of battle? *“What are you doing here, Elijah?” (1Kng 19.13)*

In the movie, “The Quiet Man,” Maureen O'Hara's Irish character is despondent over the fact that her brother has refused to release her dowry and her possessions to her after her marriage. Her husband (John Wayne) cannot grasp the depth of her need and despair. “They're just things.” But she replies angrily, “There are 300 years of dreaming in those things. They're *mine*, and I'll *have* them. Until I have my things about me, you have no part of me, *me*. Instead I'll remain the indentured servant I've always been, with nothing to call my own.” We may use our occupations, possessions, physical prowess, and even our relationships to define who we are as people – to define our worth. And when they're taken from us, we lose *ourselves* with them. That's because we've assumed a false identity; we've masked our true identity. Sometimes God takes these things from us to remind us who we truly are. It isn't what or who is *around* us that defines who we are, but who is *within* us. It isn't what we've acquired, but what we've been given, that defines our worth. If God chooses to take these externals from us, or to strike this flesh which wars against our soul (1Pet 2.11), it cannot – it *must* not – affect who we are in His sight, and in *reality*. We're still His precious children; and He's still our precious Father.

Yet we tend to ascribe ulterior motives to God's actions whenever they result in our “loss.” We react emotionally before our intellect has a chance to recover. We deny what has happened. We reject it as too bizarre to be true. We fly into a rage, demanding accountability. We ask, “Why me?” or “Why them?” as if asking God to justify Himself to us – Job's error. And though we may believe that it isn't in God's nature to torment us for no reason, we still want to exact

vengeance on any earthly cause of our misfortune that we can find – whether a drunk driver, an inept hospital nurse, or a street thug. “Someone will pay for this injustice! I did nothing to deserve this!” Can you hear Job’s protest in this? Corrie ten Boom told Chuck Swindoll that she had learned to hold lightly to things, so it wouldn’t hurt so much when God took them from her.

Why has this happened?

What do we hold onto instead of holding onto Christ alone? Maybe the answer to that question is the reason we ask, “Why?” in the face of suffering. “Why” is really the wrong question to ask. We only ask it when we want to assess blame. It seeks justification, and in the absence of justification, it seeks retribution. The “who” question is already settled in Scripture. *God* has brought us this suffering, whether directly or indirectly. I’d like to suggest that, when we encounter suffering in our life, instead of asking “why?” we should ask, “To what end?” A number of years ago, there was a best-selling book titled, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” I had a pastor friend who wanted to write a rebuttal entitled, “Why do good things happen to bad people?” He was referring to our undeserved salvation. Scripture says both things occur, and God is the author of both (Isa 45.7). What does He have in mind as the result of this suffering? He is not a wanton destroyer; so there’s a benefit to be found, even if it’s a costly one.

To be honest, I’m not comforted when someone says we don’t know why God does these things, or that we may never know why. That’s just not true. We *do* know why, and we *can* accept our suffering gratefully from God’s hand. We don’t have to just accept our “fate” grudgingly, or go on blind faith that God will somehow make it up to us, like some cosmic accounting mistake that He has to pay back. But don’t expect to find such understanding and acceptance immediately. I heard one pastor say, tears streaming down his face, “It took me years to thank God for the death of my son.” The understanding and acceptance were there, but the grief remained. Another lost a wife to cancer. He said, with a lump in his throat, “Time doesn’t heal. God heals. It takes time.” Joy and grief can coexist without any inconsistency.

Joy is a mental attitude, not an emotional state of being. It’s a conscious choice we make. In James 1.2-3 we read, “[Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.](#)” To consider something nasty, as something good, is a *willful* act, not a spontaneous emotional response. God considers us righteous for Christ’s sake. We’re *not* righteous, but He *considers* us so. That’s how we’re to respond to suffering and chastening. It isn’t pleasant, but we’re to *consider* it as a joy or a benefit of sonship (Heb.12.7). That means we’ve got to understand it in the context of God’s plan for our life. Joy is usually linked in Scripture to suffering, and to the perseverance of the saints. We may ask, “Why do we need to persevere? We’re saved. Isn’t that enough?” Not by a long shot.

Christ’s joy was displayed by his scorn of the shame, abuse, and pain he suffered in order to fulfill God’s purposes (Heb 12.2). That gave meaning to Christ’s sacrifice – it made it *desirable* (Joh 10.17-18; 15.13) – so that the benefit would become obvious to the whole world. He was engaged in a war for our very souls, against a canny enemy, and victory required Christ’s death.

If we’re a soldier in time of war, we need to be convinced of the righteousness of our cause, and of the need to win. If we’re protecting our homeland and our families, it’s pretty clear why we’ve put our lives on the line. If we’re captured and tortured, we need to be convinced of the need to keep faith with our comrades. We need to remember the “benefit” of revealing nothing that would compromise them, or victory. And that’s also the only way we can withstand the pain of

our torture when we're engaged in spiritual warfare, when we're under threats of death and pain by the enemies of Christ, who oppose him and us, tangibly and physically.

What if our suffering isn't for Christ's sake?

But it isn't all that clear-cut when our suffering is **not for our faith**. When we suffer, and we're not being persecuted for righteousness' sake (Mat 5.10), or for Christ's sake (Act 9.16), then where is this homeland? Who are these comrades? What is the great cause for which we lay down our lives? If we don't know the answer to those questions, then we can easily be fooled into thinking that suffering which is somehow "disengaged" from the cause of Christ, is less honorable, less understandable, less justifiable, and less tolerable. And so we struggle in our pain and despair – we reject it, and oppose it, seeing no point to it, no benefit to be gained by it. We think it's just the random consequence of a fallen world, which happened to fall on *us* this time.

That's a false dichotomy. We must overcome our reluctance to put everything we have at risk for the cause of Christ, for the redemption of the lost — *especially* the lost of our relationships, physical comfort, and material goods. In suffering for no apparent or obvious reason, we best distance ourselves from the world. It's enduring such suffering with grace, that demonstrates to everyone around us that we don't live here, that we're sojourners and not permanent residents – that our eyes are on Jesus in *every* circumstance, and that his eyes are on us.

“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.” (Luk 14.26 ^{NKJ})

In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” (Joh 16.33 ^{NKJ})

“I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.” (Joh 17.15-18 ^{NKJ})

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” (1Jo 2.15 ^{NKJ})

We must see that *every* suffering, *every* loss, *every* sacrifice, *every* withholding, involves the cause of Christ. We need to have a world view instead of a parochial view, an eternal view instead of a temporal view. We need to see the world of lost souls from an eternal perspective. We can't say to ourselves, “Well, they've got food, clothing and shelter. Salvation for them would be nice, but the cost for me is too high. I have too much to lose. I'd do what I could, but right now I've got my own problems, my own thorn in the flesh, my own excuse for focusing on myself instead of anyone else.” That's when we know that we're prisoners of our possessions and our flesh. Our treasures have been misplaced, and our heart with them (Mat 6.21). As he was dying on the cross, Christ spoke of paradise to the prisoner on his side. He never lost his eternal perspective, despite his circumstances and his pain. Suffering is the testing of our heart's desires; and accepting our suffering is our testimony to the world that Christ lives in us (Gal 2.20).

Whether suffering comes by persecution for Christ's sake, or by happenstance in a fallen world, we're still in a war. Suffering is one of the battlefields on which the struggle between good and evil takes place. Christ broke us out of prison, and we've been conscripted into God's army. Our

mission is to set the other prisoners free. If we don't believe that, and act on it, our whole life becomes a sham. How and where we wage war is based on our gifts, our past experiences, and our current circumstances; but waging the war itself, is not optional. Recognizing that the war rages around us every day, is not optional. If we aren't motivated to grab our weapons and head into the field of battle, despite our own suffering, in the *midst* of our own suffering, then we don't have any concept of who Christ is, or what he has done for us. In this war, the outcome is inevitable, but so are the casualties, the pain, the loss, and the suffering.

What is my role in suffering?

Perhaps you're not the one suffering. Maybe you're the care-giver. Maybe the one you're caring for is a believer, maybe not. It's still a war, and this suffering is still a battlefield, and your loving care for this person is a weapon of love in God's arsenal. It's your personal testimony of the sacrificial service that Jesus Christ rendered to you, and which you now offer in his name. You serve and care under Christ's authority and power, directly exercising his grace and mercy, to the benefit of this soul who has been entrusted to your care by God. And so, you should care for this person as if you're caring for Christ himself. You're seeing Christ in his suffering, and you're waiting on him at the foot of the cross. But don't expect thanksgiving, or glory, or honor for your service. Christ received none (Mk 14.65; 15.20, 29-20). These come from God who sees from above (Mat 6.4). You may instead receive curses and ingratitude from this person (Mat 5.44). And so, you must not serve for this person's sake, or you may find yourself wallowing in self-pity, or enduring suffering yourself. Your strength will be spent if your love is conditioned on receiving love in return. It doesn't work that way. You must serve this person for Christ's sake alone, expecting *nothing* in return. That's when the strength of God, and the peace of God which surpasses understanding, will come to you. You don't need to know the reason for this suffering, or what its outcome will be. You only need to do your duty in the moment.

During World War II a decorated hero who volunteered for hazardous duty was lied to about the location and strength of our troops. He was then sent into Germany, and compromised by his own people, so that he would be captured. All of this was unknown to him. He broke under torture and revealed to his captors the lies that he'd been fed by his superiors. Because of the immense pain he endured before breaking, his captors believed the lies to be true, and committed their troops to the wrong location. That helped to win the war. But it didn't help the soldier live with the memory of being broken, and of divulging what he believed was secret information.

Does God treat us like cannon fodder in this way? *Not at all!* But it's just as important that when we suffer, we preserve the glory and honor of God by responding appropriately to circumstances, even if we never know what purpose it will serve in eternity. God was proud of Job, saying to Satan, **"Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?"** (Job 1.8 ^{ESV}) Yet Satan was unimpressed. He thought that if he could hurt Job badly enough, taking everything from him, including his health, then surely Job would curse God. In fact, Job's wife encouraged Job to do exactly that: to curse God and die – *to put an end to it*. Job responded, **"Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?"** (Job 2.10 ^{ESV}) How we respond to our suffering and loss is our testimonial to God, and a demonstration of our trust in Him. Even as Job wrestled with confronting God about his suffering, he said **"Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him."** (13.15 ^{NKJ}) Who else could Job trust to hear his lament and to comfort him, if not God?

The Testimony of Suffering

When Paul writes to the Philippians about the GIFT OF SUFFERING (1.29-30), he says that they are now going through the same struggle that he has had, and continues to have. The struggle is not an internal struggle. It's not wrestling with God, or trying to prepare ourselves for battle.

Suffering itself is the battle! The Greek word used for struggle describes an external, public arena in which a contest is taking place. We are very much in a Roman Coliseum where the lions are waiting to eat our flesh (1Pet 5.8). If we bear witness to Christ in a Christ-like way, we will become the first seeds that fall to the ground and die, producing their fruit — thirty, sixty, a hundred-fold what was sown (Joh. 12.24). That's how we take the gospel to the world under God's banner. We must be ever-aware of the arena we're in. We find it in our schools and workplaces, in our government and media. *Suffering is a rite of purification*, purging the dross and strengthening the steel. God brings suffering to his warriors to prepare them for battle. And yet, there is very real pain and loss, in this very real battle.

Here's the irony, as Job discovered: *only God can soothe our pain*. Why should we seek comfort from the very one who brought us the suffering? Because we participate in God's plan in the world (2Pet. 1.3-5, 10). We have the mind of Christ, and that mind is united in purpose with God the Father. We both desire the same things, don't we? — And yet, *there's* the rub. "What has taking my child's life got to do with winning souls to Christ?" or "What has my being raped got to do with God's will for my life?" Let's continue to look at suffering when it's *not* linked to evangelism, when we're *not* being persecuted for Christ's sake. Where is the blessing? Why is it true that my suffering should not remove my joy? Or the more difficult question, how can my suffering be a *cause* for joy? How may I move from the one state of mind to the other? How can I recognize the benefit to me, and to those around me, of *my* suffering, or of *any* suffering?

In James 4.8-10 we are given a series of conditional promises. If we draw near to God, then He will draw near to us. So one reason for suffering is to draw us near to God. If we wash our hands, purify our hearts, and stop being double-minded about our relationship with Him, He will come near to us. If we grieve, mourn and wail, and change our laughter to mourning and our joy to gloom, He will come near to us. Why would I want to trade in my joy for gloom? It may help to ask, What am I grieving, mourning, and wailing about? Is it my earthly circumstances, or my spiritual condition? Is my sorrow *Godly* sorrow which leads to repentance, expressed without regret (2Cor. 7.10)? Or is it frustration that I didn't get the desires of my heart? Godly sorrow produces earnestness in our endeavors, an eagerness to acquit ourselves in God's sight, indignation that we should be accused of failing to live up to our potential. I suspect that we're sometimes afraid that it might be true. We believers long to please God. We're concerned about how to do that; and we're eager to see justice done. ¹

Our Choice in Suffering

When I consider Christ, and how far short of his expectations I fall, I *ought* to grieve, mourn and bewail my sin. I *ought* to despair and gnash my teeth. Suffering makes us choose between our agenda for ourselves, and Christ's agenda for us — Christ's agenda will bring us closer to God.

¹ **2Cor 7:10-11** For godly sorrow produces repentance *leading* to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, *what* clearing of yourselves, *what* indignation, *what* fear, *what* vehement desire, *what* zeal, *what* vindication! In all *things* you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

We're called to progress from how *we* see ourselves, to how *others* see us, and then to how *God* sees us. We're to move from dependence on self, to dependence on others, to dependence on God. We're to get over our pride, and pursue humility, in the *presence* of God. And here's the hard thing to acknowledge or deal with in the midst of our suffering: suffering can expose our pride. If we humble ourselves before the Lord, He will lift us up, as Christ was lifted up and exalted on the cross (Phil. 2.5-9).

“And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast.” (1Pet. 5.6, 10)

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (James 1.2-4)

God's plan is to use our suffering to make us strong, firm, steadfast, persevering, mature, and complete. It may humble us, but suffering is not given to cripple, weaken, or punish us. That same pastor who lost his son said this: “God is not an arsonist. His fires are meant to purify, and not to destroy.” We cannot receive these gifts with thanksgiving, if we don't trust God.

Trusting God in the Midst of Suffering

I have painfully concluded that too often, *I don't trust God*. If something is going well, it seems He wants to take it away from me, perhaps to see if I love him more than what I'm holding onto. He becomes a “taker” in my mind, a spoiler, a teaser. That's a perverted view of God, of course; but emotionally that's pretty much what I'm feeling. In the old hymn we're told, “Christian, love me more than these.” How would I behave if, like Abraham, God demanded of me the one thing I'd waited for all my life? And why does God make such a demand? How does He have the audacity to demand that one thing from me, or from anyone? Isn't His duty (Satan asks) to provide for me as I want to be provided for? Well, to be frank, NO, it's not. That's a god of my own making; it's not the God of Scripture. I tend to love the creature and the creation, more than I love the Creator. That's my flesh working against my spirit. So God needs to constantly remind me of my right relationship with him, because I won't remind myself. And the reminder comes in the *circumstance*, and in the *suffering*. Suffering presents me with a choice (Jos. 24.15).

We aren't asked to be happy about our circumstances or our suffering. We're told to consciously consider the deeper joy that will result from it (2Cor.7.4). Calvin Miller wrote, “Happiness is not the goal of the Christian life, rather it is the result of it.” If we cannot express joy in the moment of our suffering, we must at least accept, intellectually, that God has our long-term good in mind. That long-term good is not based on our purpose *in this world*, but only on our purpose *in the kingdom of God*. And our purpose in the kingdom of God is to know God's mind, to glorify him in this world and the next, and to enjoy him forever. Anything not in pursuit of that purpose, is stripped from us, and it's replaced with something that *is* in pursuit of that purpose.

Can all sorrow and suffering be used by God? What if I'm doing everything God expects of me? What if I'm serving Him and my fellow man, just as God prescribes? What need is there of suffering to draw me near to him? Is Satan punishing me behind God's back, as punishment for being a child of God? Is this “spiritual oppression,” as my charismatic brothers claim?

Suffering cannot come from Satan independent of God's will. God is sovereign. Nothing takes place in this life without His knowledge or consent. However, suffering doesn't necessarily flow

from our own actions. In fact, suffering is often the result of someone else's sin, which produces consequences that flow into our life. Philosophers call it a "secondary cause." Suffering may be the result of a natural disaster which flows from God's physical laws. Or it may be part of God's larger plan to punish or redeem a nation. We're caught in the cross-fire; we're collateral damage. And when these things happen, it isn't the circumstance created by that sin or disaster that matters so much, as how we respond to it. It isn't the question of why it happened, or who caused it, as much as how God will *use* it — for us, for the world, and for His own glory. You see, we need to ask the right questions before we can understand how to deal with our circumstances.

If God *permitted* our suffering, if He indeed *brought* it to us, then by opposing it, rejecting it, and condemning it, we oppose, reject, and condemn God. By seeking vengeance against the sinner who brought us our suffering, we reject God's intent to bless us by it, and we reject God's right to exact His own vengeance come Judgment Day. Vengeance is something reserved *by* God, *for* God. God and his government appointee may exact punishment, but we must not. God doesn't want us tainted by blood-lust. That doesn't mean we let sin run amuck in our society. But we deal with it in a reasoned and institutionalized fashion. We live by the rule of law instead of by the law of *vendetta*. Retribution sanctifies the law. Vengeance corrupts it.

The Personal Nature of Suffering

Let's take a breath here. This is all well and good for dealing with suffering in a general way, in an impersonal way, as it regards others. But suffering is a very *personal* thing when it happens to us. Which of us could suffer what Job suffered, and respond to it as Job initially did? He affirmed that "the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord... and in all this Job did not sin." (Job 1.21; 2.10) Why do we find it so hard to speak such an affirmation ourselves? Was Job a stronger person than we are today? Did God not give him the same emotional trauma with his suffering that we receive with ours? I think it's clear from Scripture that Job was every bit as vexed under his circumstances as we are under ours. He admitted God had the right, but he denied that he had done anything to warrant it. He wanted his day in court to prove it. Yet he knew he couldn't win his case, not with God sitting as the judge. So Job whined to his wife, and to his friends, until a man of God named Elihu rebuked him for his audacity.

Elihu declared that God doesn't make the world revolve around any individual's performance, good or bad (Job 35.6-8). What does that mean? Doesn't God care about me, personally? Doesn't He want good things for me, *personally*? Doesn't He want to protect me from evil? Yes, He does want that for us. But more than that, He wants the *best* for us. He wants us to be like His son. He wants us to have fellowship with Him. He wants us to enjoy eternity with Him. He wants us to desire a relationship with Him more than anything else in the world. He wants us to be His friend in the same way that Abraham was His friend. And from Abraham, God demanded the life of his son, Isaac. Abraham did not withhold from God what He requested (Gen 22.12). In return, God did not withhold the promise from him. And according to that promise, God did not withhold His own son from us, so that we might know Him and enjoy Him forever.

Christ's death on the cross was a willing sacrifice of self for God's will. Christ begged to be relieved of the burden, but if not, then God's will be done (Mat 25.42). He gave up family, friends, hometown, possessions, dignity, power, and control (Phi 2.7). And in the end, the only benefits he received for his obedience, were punishment, isolation, humiliation, and death. He deserved *none* of these. He willingly laid down his life. And yet he wasn't a victim, but a victor

in doing so. He wasn't defeated, but triumphant. His name is above all names, and all creation is being placed under his feet (Phi 2.9; Eph 1.20-23).

Perhaps we don't see that as *our* role in God's scheme of things. Christ knew what his role was. I suspect we often doubt ours. In the day-to-day rush of life, we forget our call to serve in God's kingdom. We know that we've been saved, but we don't always know what to do next. We don't know how to act out our salvation in fear and trembling (Phi 2.12). We say we belong to Christ, but continue to live as we've always lived, plowing the same fields we've always plowed. He bids us come and follow him. But like Philip, we ask, "Follow you where, Lord? How can we know the way if we don't know where you're going?" Oh, we know. We just don't like where it leads. We hate suffering, risk, discomfort, inconvenience, opposition, or embarrassment. *If we forget our calling*, these become excuses to flee the battle, and barriers to our service.

Joining with Christ in His Suffering

We mediate Christ to the world. We *are* Christ to the world. But we balk at believing that when we leave Christ out of the equation. "In my sinfulness, how can I be an ambassador for Christ?" We forget that we are perfected in Christ: we are wholly acceptable and pleasing to God. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8.1). Being "in Christ" means we are united to Christ, made one with Christ, inseparable from Christ. How we respond to the suffering God brings to us, is the evidence of our union with Christ – the measure and extent of our joining with Christ in his suffering (1Pet 4.13).

Consider this controversial statement: *Jesus was not Christ until he died on the cross*. Up to that point, he had only the potential to be the anointed one. What I mean is that, until he fulfilled his role as Messiah, he had not purchased redemption for any of us, regardless of his intention to do so. In the same way, until we are face to face with our own trials and losses, we don't know what it is to be Christ to the world. In the midst of our own suffering, we must come to grips with being Christ to the world, and JOINING WITH CHRIST IN HIS SUFFERING.

The suffering we're talking about isn't just what comes as a direct result of our ministry, or as a result of our gospel proclamation. Rather, what manifests Christ in us is our acceptance of, and response to, God's will in the circumstance. How we respond to *undeserved* punishment is the essence of Christ; we're putting it on display for all the world to see. It is Satan who whispers in our ear, telling us that we have no purpose in this circumstance, no benefit to reap, because it's not persecution *for Christ's sake*. That's a lie! We can suffer for Christ's glory at any time, in any place, under any circumstance. Thinking we need to suffer "for Christ's sake," only accentuates the fact we have separated our *religious activity* from our *everyday life*. We want to be Sunday-morning warriors at the church building, and then return to our cozy den by the start of the football game. And we want to stay in that cozy den until next Sunday, if then.

God makes no such distinction between secular and sacred life. He wants us to respond to *every* circumstance, good or bad, just as His son would respond. He gave us Christ's example to enable us to do that, specifically. But too often we cling to the world for all it's worth when we should be clinging to Christ. Let me say it another way. We're not distinguished from non-Christians by our circumstances. We all experience the same kinds of tragedies and triumphs in our life. We only become distinguished from them by our *response* to those circumstances, and by the *reasons* we have to celebrate, despite our pain. That's the point at which Christ is preached to the world.

Suffering isn't Punishment

God doesn't bring us suffering to punish us – he uses our suffering to conform us to the image of Christ. God brings us circumstances for our *choice*, not our *compensation*. Suffering is a GIFT from God! Don't blame Him for it. It's the means by which He removes every barrier that remains between Him and us. “For it has been *granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him*” (Phi.1.29) If that were not true, half the Bible wouldn't make sense. God would be a fickle tormentor, sometimes hating us and sometimes loving us. He would be a predatory god of war, and a whimsical god of mercy, treating his worshippers no differently than his enemies. He would be a manic depressive personality with sadistic tendencies. That's not the picture of God that Scripture reveals. That's not someone we desire to be faithful to, because obviously such a god would not be faithful to us.

But that is not our Creator. God sent his only son to die for our sins on the cross. He wants the best for us, and sometimes that means suffering, so that we can become the people He designed us to be. That's to His glory and our benefit, our *good*. Why then should we complain when our expectations aren't met, or when He takes what we cherish? *If we keep the eternal always in our sight, perhaps we won't hold so tightly to the things of this world* (2Cor 4.17-18). Some of those things can be loved ones, our hopes and dreams for the future, our possessions, or our sinful desire for fame, fortune, power, and pleasure. *Be pure in heart* (Mat 5.8): *want the right things for the right reasons*. Then we may be willing to embrace *whatever* God brings our way, even death. Grief may overtake us, but hope will never leave us (2Cor 4.7-10), because God will never leave us (Mat 28.20). His promises and His love are forever (Isa 54.7-8).

We must resolve to live for Christ, and not for ourselves. If what we do is for Christ, then we will receive the blessings that accompany suffering, and the joy as well. But if we live for self, then we will reap no benefit and experience no joy to compensate for our suffering. Therefore, we must *strive* to be pure of heart and single-minded in purpose (Phil 3.13). We must also forgive ourselves when we fail to be so, for the Lord is faithful (Luk 22.32). We need to set aside any doubts we may have about our motives. Paul writes, “*What does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this, I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice...*” (Phi.18).

If we do the right *actions*, and we let God worry about our *motives*, then if suffering accompanies the actions, or it just happens, the joy *will* follow. That's because we've been faithful to our calling and to God's will for our life. His will is that we know Him (Joh 17.3), and that we be conformed to the image of His son (Rom 8.29). Suffering is the means by which He accomplishes both these things (Prov 17.3). “*But now, O LORD, You are our Father; We are the clay, and You are our potter; And we are all the work of Your hand.*” (Isaiah 64.8 ^{ESV})

The Benefit of Suffering: Knowing Christ

Twila Paris wrote a song titled, “This Thorn” in which she describes the benefits of suffering, as Paul suffered with his thorn in the flesh. I'm going to lay it out in prose format:

Thank you for this thorn embedded in my flesh, I can feel the mystery, my spirit is made fresh, You are sovereign still, and forever wise, I can see the miracle opening my eyes To a proud heart so quick to judge, Laying down crosses and carrying grudges, The veil has been torn, and I thank you for this thorn.

Thank you for this thorn, *fellowship of pain*, Teaching me to know you more, never to complain, Thank you for this love planted in my side, Faithful, patient miracle, opening my eyes. I never thought I'd say it without reservation, But I'm truly grateful for this piercing revelation, Of a proud heart so quick to judge Laying down crosses, and carrying grudges The veil has been torn, and I thank you for this thorn.

And if You chose to take it, I will praise You, And thank You for the healing in Your name, But if it must remain, I thank you for your rod, Evidence of Father-love for a child of God; *I join you in the sorrow*, So much less than you have borne, And I thank you, really thank you, Lord I thank you, I thank you for this thorn.

Notice the benefits and the motives that she ascribes to God — the *joining with Christ* that our suffering can bring. “Thank you for this thorn, fellowship of pain, teaching me to know you more, never to complain.” For whatever reason, pain and suffering always *surprise* us. They *shock* us. We never expect them as a normal part of life — but they are. Peter wrote, “*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.* ¹³ *But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.*” (1Pe 4.12-13 ^{ESV}) And again, the disconnect happens when we're not suffering for Christ's sake, when the pain seems pointless and cruel – as it did to Job. Suffering is never pointless. *We need to think of it as a necessary part of our sanctification.*

Suffering is part of the molding and shaping that conforms us to the image of Christ. God needs to break up the clay to rework it. Breaking it up is a painful process. What must hold me in its vise, is the sure knowledge that God is trustworthy, and that I will benefit by it. He's sanctifying me through the work of the Holy Spirit, and the cleansing of his word. Through Scripture, I am confronted with the truth of who God is, and the truth of who I am. Through Scripture, I acquire the mind of God, the eternal perspective of God, the encouragement of all those who have gone before me in the service of God. There I gain the discerning wisdom I need to live a godly life, which is pleasing to my Creator and beneficial to my fellow man. I must humble myself, or God will humble me beneath his mighty hand. I choose each day the path I will take. There is no middle road to take, no middle ground to stand on. I am either in the service of God or Satan. Suffering is designed to draw me to God to glorify His name, not to drive me to Satan to curse God and die (Job 2.9).

The Purposefulness of Suffering

When Paul wrote about that thorn in his flesh (whatever it may have been). he realized over time, not right away, that there was purpose in his suffering and weakness. This was the man ordained by God to preach to the Gentiles. He was transported to the third heaven to see and hear things that few men have ever seen or heard – things about Christ and the kingdom, revelations of God's glory and majesty. It could have inflated his ego. “*So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.*” (2Co 12.7 ^{ESV})

Solomon knew that “*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall* (Pro 16.18 ^{NKJ}). God wasn't punishing Paul with the thorn in his flesh. He wasn't taunting him with the messenger from Satan. God was *protecting* Paul, out of lovingkindness, and with concern for Paul's soul. In preserving Paul for the work laid out before him, God acted for His own glory, and for Paul's good.

I need to constantly remind myself who I was before Christ laid hold of me. I need to remember what God has done *for* me, not what he has done *to* me. I need to consider my ways and forget about what I think will bring me fame, fortune, power, pleasure, or ease, even within the bounds of the church. Paul said he considered such things “dung.” I need God to chastise me and to love me in a way that seems brutal in the moment, but brings joy in the end. *And that joy will surely come!* It will come from knowing that God loved me enough to hold me fast, to drive me to a place of safety with His rod and His staff — giving me boundaries for my comfort and assurance, and to provide a place for me in his kingdom (Psa 23.4).

All that I am, and all that I will be, comes from God. If he chooses to remove some things from me, what can he take from me that he didn't give to me in the first place? (1Cor 4.7) Why should I complain? Why would I want to? If my heart is right, if my mind is focused on God, I can only give thanks for the suffering He brings to me (Eph 5.20).

Conclusion

Therefore I must pray to have the mind of Christ (Rom 8.6); I must humble myself before God (1Pet 5.6); I must fear Him and obey his commands (Ecc 12.13). *This* is what my life is for. May I live accordingly (Col 1.9-12). So may we all.

⁸ Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. ⁹ Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. ¹⁰ But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle *you*. ¹¹ To Him *be* the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1Pe 5.8-11 ^{NKJ})