

New Testament Lessons on Suffering

- 1) Hebrews 12:5-12 steels believers with the proper attitude at their face suffering. We learn here that suffering helps us combat sin (12:4); that it can actually be encouraging (12:5) since it represents God's hand in our lives and interest in our growth; and that it is a mark of our status as children of God (12:8). Further, it follows the example of God's relationship with Jesus, whose suffering taught him obedience (5:7-9). The message is clear: God uses suffering for our growth (see also Rom 5:3-5).

One of the most eloquent passages on Christian suffering is **2 Cor 4:7-18**. In it, Paul uses four words to describe his suffering for the gospel:¹

Afflicted (*thlipsis*): nagging negative circumstances – loss of comfort to serve others; material sacrifice; hectic schedule; etc.

Perplexed (*aporeo*): “without a way” – confusion about the next step; doubt (not just about one's own life but others' as well)

Persecuted (*diokoo*): hostility and attack from enemies – could include persecution or spiritual attack, hostility from unbelieving family members, job mistreatment, etc.

Struck down (*kataballo*): to be cast down – sudden, unexpected failures; cherished plans or relationships lost; ministry failure; betrayed by fellow workers

Though not apostles like Paul we each have given many hours to the church and the kingdom and share some of the experiences listed above. From this passage, what is the value of suffering? What does Paul mean by the “outer nature”? What does suffering do to it? How does Paul manage to see his suffering in a positive light, and how does this reframing help him endure it?

- 2) The NT makes it abundantly clear that suffering is part of normal Christian life. Paul says in 2 Tim 3:12, “Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Jesus told his disciples to take up their crosses and lose their lives for his sake. This view pervades the NT: **1 Peter 4:1-2, 12; 2 Tim 2:3-4; Acts 14:22**; Mt 10:11-42; Heb 12:5; Phil 1:29; 2 Tim 2:3; etc.

“Suffering” immediately calls to mind religious persecution (e.g. Mt 10:34-39, “I have come not to bring peace, but a sword”, Jn 15:18, 20). But even in first-century Rome, not all believers faced this.

There is another type of suffering which comes when we deliberately open ourselves and are vulnerable to others for the sake of Christ. This is the suffering Jesus experienced when betrayed by Peter and Judas. To selflessly love others necessarily means vulnerability, and vulnerability inevitably means suffering. How have you experienced this kind of suffering? Has this suffering drawn you toward or away from God and the Church? Why?

- 3) The NT teaches us that our attitude toward our lives, possessions and earthly goals plays a crucial role in our surviving and thriving when we face suffering. Read **Phil 3:4b-21**. We know that if we could

1 See <http://www.xenos.org/classes/principles/cpu2w6.htm#a5> for more details.

imitate Paul's attitude, and develop what Carson calls a "homesickness heaven", we might be better able to face up to loss of health, job, loved ones, etc. Indeed, Jesus says that we cannot serve two masters; our heart is for our earthly pursuits or it is for him.

Yet we thank God for job, family, health – these are gifts from God. Who have you known who has best held lightly onto this life and its trappings? What was that person's secret?

- 4) Aside from teaching us perseverance, suffering can enable us to connect with others who have suffered in similar ways. **Heb 2:17-18, 4:14-16** shows us that Jesus is again the model for this. How has your suffering connected you with others with similar experiences? How might it?
- 5) Job teaches that we should pursue God for who God is, not for the blessings we receive from being God's child and a member of the family of Christ. A corollary is that we must trust God even when we don't understand God. Read Keller's description of Elisabeth Elliot's novel, *No Graven Image (Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering, 170-172)*.

Why do you follow God? (Your experience of God's love; the logic of the gospel; trust for Christian parents or role models; because you did yesterday; etc.) What have you learned from scripture that equips you to trust God at this level?

- 6) Job is a story of *disproportionate suffering*, suffering which far exceeds what the sufferer appears to deserve, or could grow in response to. Disproportionate suffering includes both those in the third world who face hunger and famine, as well as those whose faith is shattered by tragedy beyond what they can handle. Systematic theology tells us that this category is an illusion. No suffering is unjust since we are all sinners deserving death who suffer from the fallenness of the world. Carson juxtaposes these views when he writes,

..the link between suffering and retribution found in, say, Deuteronomy, Proverbs, and Romans, is never so mathematically rigid, so symmetrically precise, as to rule out the kind of suffering this book considers. Intuitively we know it is so. When a father rapes his six-year-old daughter, in what conceivable sense is the daughter "responsible"? Of course, her suffering is the result of sin – someone else's sin. But that is exactly what makes her the innocent victim. Doubtless she is not innocent on any absolute scale. Six-year-old girls cannot possibly be innocent on any absolute scale: they take after their parents. But what sin has the girl committed that makes her incestuous rape an appropriate "retribution"? [*How Long, O Lord*, 140]

Imagine that Zophar's sick (serves him right) and you are called to fill in for him. Given your knowledge of the NT how would you help Job understand his disproportionate suffering? How did you explain the tragedy of global suffering to your children?