

Truths to Help You Thrive in the Midst of Suffering

Is suffering a good thing? Is suffering to be embraced? Or avoided?

Suffering never feels good. That's why it's called suffering. Some Christian believers seem to embrace suffering and grow from it personally and spiritually. Other believers seem to avoid it at all costs, wonder why God doesn't always relieve their suffering, and wonder what's wrong when suffering continues.

Much of that confusion, I believe, comes from a failure to understand the difference between necessary and unnecessary suffering.

Unnecessary Suffering

There are countless ways in which we suffer—physically, emotionally, spiritually. But not all of that suffering is necessary or inevitable. It's not a pleasant thought, but sometimes you cause the suffering yourself.

What about the suffering of material lack—poverty? Have you invested your time and energy well, refusing to blame others for where you are in life? Have you learned good money-management skills, staying away from debt? Have you learned to be a wise steward of any physical resources you have?

What about the suffering from the breakup of a marriage? Did you give up too soon when your marriage might have been saved with hard work? Did you neglect your spouse too long in too many ways? Did you compromise your boundaries, or refuse to deal with damaging things in your own character?

What about physical suffering? Are you experiencing the consequences of a lifestyle of unhealthy eating, no exercise

or substance abuse? Have you cared for your body well, with appropriate rest and medical care?

Wallowing in shame and guilt about any of this is not useful. But it is sobering to realize that some of our suffering was caused or at least made worse by the decisions we made and actions we took.

That's actually good news! Because it also means we can now reduce our suffering in those areas by making new decisions and taking different actions.

Necessary Suffering

God's people have always suffered. And some of that suffering is necessary if we want to experience all that God has for us in His kingdom.

Moses suffered under the burden of an uneducated band of slaves who regularly rebelled against what God told them to do. Elijah suffered the furious anger of a Jezebel out to destroy him after he demonstrated the reality of the God of heaven. Jesus suffered misunderstanding, rejection and death from those who refused His offer of life. Peter, Paul and others endured suffering as a result of their refusal to shut up about the message God had entrusted them to share.

There are times—many times—when doing the right thing invites suffering:

- The parent who continues to care for a disabled child
- The spouse who loves husband or wife well through a long or terminal illness
- The family who gives the money they might have spent on themselves to support their church or help a family in worse need
- The couple who follows God's direction to plant a church or serve in a mission field

- The employee who refuses to compromise his Christian principles even though it might cost him his job
- The business owner who acts with integrity even when it may cost her market share or profits
- The believer who risks alienating friends or family by lovingly standing up for righteousness in some controversial area

Have you ever talked with someone who has suffered in one of these ways? Frequently they will not think of their experience as suffering, or at least not talk about it as such. The meaning, fulfillment or reassurance that they are doing what God wants them to do is what matters most.

Suffering Well

It's a mistake to believe that all suffering comes from either God or Satan. Some of our suffering comes from our own choices.

It's also a mistake to believe that all suffering is either good or bad.

So if you find yourself suffering in some way, here are some questions to ask that will help you know if your suffering is necessary or unnecessary.

1. What choices do I have?

And you *always* have choices! You may not always like the choices you have, but you always have them. You may have the choice to change your lifestyle, to work harder or smarter, or to learn to forgive. You may need to learn to love well even through painful circumstances. You may come to realize that the eternal benefits of the suffering you may encounter far outweigh any temporary gains from compromise.

2. What is God calling me to do right here, right now?

If your spouse or your child is sick, God is calling to you be

right there caring for them. If you are not living the healthy lifestyle you know you should, God is calling you to make the necessary changes regardless of how hard it may be. If your popularity or job or comfort might be at risk by acting out of truth and integrity, God is calling you to put Him first—regardless.

Sometimes these questions are challenging. Take the time to learn what God says about your situation rather than simply seeking the easy way out

3. How can I hold on to God's strength through this?

If your suffering is the result of godly choices, He will always give you the strength to persevere. He will also give you the motivation you need to make hard changes if you need to undo some unnecessary suffering. You may need to learn how to “suffer well”—refusing to accept shame or guilt for unnecessary suffering, while embracing suffering that comes from doing things God's way.

One day there will be no more suffering. And Paul said it will all be worth it! “Our light affliction, which lasts but for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor. 4:17).

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