

Your Heb. 12:2 Reminder in Times of Pain and Problems

Some suffering is unnecessary. Suffering that we bring on ourselves through our sin and brokenness means that if our actions change, our suffering can change. But not all suffering is “unnecessary.” How do you handle the suffering you cannot avoid?

There was a lot of response to my previous article “How to Escape Unnecessary Suffering.” So many people are wrestling with the shame and the consequences of sin and brokenness. The good news is that Jesus loves you just the same, and He wants to walk with you through this and into the next season of healing and joy.

And yet not all suffering in this world can be prevented or escaped through our own healthier actions. Sickness and accidents happen. Bad people and corrupt human institutions bring harm. Satan is real. And following Jesus can bring persecution.

I experienced much suffering as a result of my husband’s death. Yes, the comfort and presence of Jesus bring real and lasting hope. But death still hurts—a lot. In this world, grief is the price of great love. And all the smaller ways in which we suffer hurt a lot too.

We need a better theology of suffering.

A Brief Theology of Suffering

Whole books, indeed whole careers, have been devoted to this topic. We can only be brief here. A few important points:

1. Jesus promised suffering.

So don’t be surprised. ” “I have told you these things so that

in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer. I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

"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" (1 Pet. 4:12).

John, Peter, Paul—would you have really chosen the life they had? As Paul said, stoning, beatings, shipwreck, imprisonment, exile, martyrdom—it was all part of the expectation of following Jesus (2 Cor. 11:23-28).

Remember that God's enemy harasses those following Jesus. We can live in and experience the victory Jesus won for us, but while here on this earth, we still experience the fallout from the war between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness—sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly.

2. Jesus is with you even in suffering.

Remember the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace? Jesus was with them right in the middle of the fire (Dan. 3). (If you enjoy contemporary worship music, check out *Another in the Fire*.)

"When you pass through waters, I will be with you. And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame kindle on you" (Isa. 43:2).

New Testament? Yes. "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, the excellency of the power being from God and not from ourselves. We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; and always carrying around in the body the death of the Lord Jesus, that also the life of Jesus might be expressed in our bodies" (2 Cor. 4:7-10).

In the “faith hall of fame” in Hebrews 11, some faith heroes experienced amazing miracles and deliverance from trouble. Others experienced suffering and death. Same faith (Heb. 11:33-38).

3. Jesus will use “necessary” suffering for His glory.

He never enjoys your pain. But God is well able to use your pain for good—in your life, and for His kingdom (Gen. 50:20). It’s not the fact that you hurt; it’s what you allow Him to do as a result.

“Blessed are you when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be very glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in this manner they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11-12).

“If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Peter 4:14, ESV).

Less than 200 years after Jesus, Tertullian wrote, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” And even now, images of the 21 Coptic Christians beheaded by ISIS on a Mediterranean beach in 2015 have been seen around the world, and who can measure the impact for the kingdom of God?

So what now?

What to Do About Suffering

Some people wilt under suffering, seeing pain as inevitable and wondering why God would treat them so poorly.

Other people make no room for suffering in their view of God, believing those who follow Him will only experience health and wealth.

Neither is true. Your popularity, bank account or

physical/mental wellbeing are no measure of your spirituality or maturity.

If you are suffering in any way, here are three things to do.

1. Ask for God's interpretation.

Pain does not mean God is punishing you. Beyond that, you may well need to earnestly seek God in prayer to understand what's going on.

Is your current pain the result of your own sinful behavior? To any degree that is true, conviction from the Holy Spirit always points "up and to the right", showing you the pathway to healing and restoration. Refuse to buy into the devil's condemnation! (Rom. 8:1).

Might this suffering be at least partly "escapable" through growth such as practicing healthy boundaries, healthy forgiveness, better skills, increased wisdom, inner healing and so on? Could this be a matter of spiritual warfare, where applying the victory Jesus won on the cross will press back the enemy? Could this be a place where God is using the deteriorating world around you to mature you and increase your resilience? Or could this be a matter where your stand for Jesus is stirring up persecution from God's enemies?

2. Allow God to change you through suffering.

Jesus "learned obedience through the things that He suffered" (Heb. 5:8, MEV). If even Jesus, as the sinless Son of God, learned through suffering, you and I will need to do the same.

For us, we may need to learn, in part, to allow God to change our sinful hearts and grow us up so we are not experiencing unnecessary suffering.

But we can learn even through "necessary" suffering. Sometimes we may need to learn to work more effectively, empathize with others who are suffering more closely, or grow other aspects

of our character. There may well be wisdom to be gained. And engaging in healthy spiritual warfare makes you stronger.

My journey through grief has been one of suffering, but I wouldn't trade who I have become as a result for anything. Don't waste your sorrows!

3. Remember eternity.

Jesus had to look to "the joy set before Him" in order to "endure the cross, despising its shame" (Heb. 12:2b). You and I will need to keep our eyes on the future as well to make it through this suffering.

Paul, who experienced perhaps as much suffering as any follower of Jesus, considered "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). "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).

You and I have two things going for us that those who do not know Jesus don't have.

- God Himself, in the person of the Holy Spirit, is *with us*.
- We know the end of the story. Spoiler alert; Jesus wins!

Whatever your suffering now, it is "light" and "momentary"! Don't lose sight of that.

Your Turn: *How have you interpreted your suffering? Do you need to seek God's interpretation for more clarity? Leave a comment below.* {eoa}

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