

Spiritual Comforts in Suffering II
(Knowing God Through Suffering #12)

Today we come to the end of a long journey together. We have covered a lot of Biblical territory as we have tried to know and understand as much as we can concerning the evil and suffering we encounter in this fallen world, and most importantly how our sovereign/creator/ruling/sustaining God relates to that suffering and evil. Where is God and what is He doing as the troubles of this life invade our own personal experience as Christians?

We have made effort to develop a solid Biblical theological framework that will support us when we do enter in to the dark clouds of suffering. For without some theological understanding (theological response) to our troubles we will become trapped in a spiral of hopeless speculation as to what is happening.

We have encountered much that is mysterious and difficult to understand as we learned of God's sovereign and meticulous rule and governance of this fallen world.

And though much is beyond our understanding, that truth is the anchor/the bedrock foundation to our theological framework and to our peace! My Father in heaven who loves me and sent His only Son to die for my filthy sins {"he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?" "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever."}

Though I do not fully understand how God is sovereign in His decrees, yet man is responsible for his behavior, or how it is that God rules over good and evil (but not in the same way), I will yet trust Him. "It is the Lord. Let Him do what seems good to Him."

As comforting and encouraging as the truth of God's sovereignty is, isn't there more? Is that all God wants us to know? Is that all He tells us?

When we find ourselves in the midst of suffering, does the Bible give us more insight as to what God is doing in our lives other than "God is sovereign, everything is going to be alright."

Well yes. God has revealed to us in blazing clarity a myriad of ways He is working for us/in us in the crucible of suffering. Everything is not shrouded in mystery. Many things are clear. More than we can consider in one lesson.

That is what I want to do today.

Let's come to the Scriptures and ask God respectfully/humbly:

What are you up to in my suffering?

What is it exactly that you are doing?

What is happening to me?

What are your purposes?

Why this/why me/why now?

I. Comfort in the Purposes of God in Our Suffering

We will take up several Biblical principles of God's purpose in our suffering and then look at some key texts that you will want to remember.

Let me say (by way of warning) that the things we will consider are not going to address every detail of your individual experience or answer every question or give you instant relief. The comfort lies in knowing God is up to good and beneficial results for you, even in the "fog of war!"

What are some of the things I can know that God is doing:

1. God Wants Us to be Weak

(doesn't seem to be a lot of comfort in that)

We will agree that at first glance this is not an attractive dimension of our experience but it does awaken us to how God's logic is often counterintuitive to ours.

{I need to be strong/vibrant/physically/mentally/spiritually to face the sufferings. But God says no, you need weakness.}

(2 Cor 4:7-12)

Note imagery of clay pot {weak/fragile}

Logic of the potter {power of God}

Results are found in the four contrasts that demonstrate how this divine power is manifested. Paul is not done in because God sustains him. Paul's suffering becomes the platform for the display of God's sustaining power and grace.

Much the same principle we find in (1 Cor 12:8-10).

*There is something precious and meaningful to God in your felt sense of weakness/vulnerability/helplessness as He manifests His preserving power in your life {physically/mentally/spiritually}. All the same, God is at work making much of His Son's high priestly work in helping you, sustaining you!

2. God Intends to Change Us

Think about the (so called) three stages of salvation:

- a) Past – have been saved (justification)
- b) Present – are being saved (sanctification)
- c) Future – will be saved (glorification)

Obviously if you are a Christian, you find yourself in the present tense and the Bible teaches with brutal clarity that much of the “change” involved in God’s present work in our lives is brought to pass in the crucible of suffering.

(Ja 1:2-4)

Paul David Tripp, “This is a remarkable passage because it calls us, alerts us to something counterintuitive. We don’t typically experience joy in suffering, in fact we can lose our joy in the face of the smallest obstacle. ... Don’t misunderstand James. He’s not saying you should rejoice because of pain and loss. Rather, he is saying that you have reason to rejoice in the middle of your travail because of how God is using your suffering to produce in you what you could never produce in yourself! Suffering in the hands of God is used to fill you up, to grow you up, and to complete God’s work in you.”

God is determined to change us through suffering.

And as unpleasant as it may be, one of the primary (if not the primary) way in which God is pleased to effect that change is to reveal to us, bring to light, if you will, deeply entrenched patterns, things that perhaps we thought were conquered, but low and behold, there it is! {suffering doesn’t change anything, only reveals what is there}

- a) Natively, we are self-reliant. Weren’t created to be self-reliant. Never produces good fruit in us. Dependent on God and one another. Suffering exposes the face we are not self-sufficient.
- b) At times we can become somewhat self-righteous (smug), we’ve arrived/mature/reformed, and then in the pressure of suffering, irritable/impatient. Not quite as mature as we thought. Need fresh grace.
- c) All too often we become idolatrously attached to the things/the comforts/the pleasures of this life. Has the power to render those things powerless to help us.

*Now let me ask you, do you find that comforting? (painful at times, no doubt, but comforting?)

*What is God up to? Make you look like His Son, Jesus Christ!

{Michelangelo, “start with a block of marble and chipped away everything that did not look like David.”}

3. God is Preparing You for Ministry

The high calling of God through the saving work of our LJC brings us in to the orbit of the lives of other people in the church and in the world.

That calling includes having an effective ministry.

Tripp, "Ministry is not so much a career or a kind of episodic volunteerism; for every believer it is a lifestyle we have been called to. The problem is that we don't naturally have the desire to make personal sacrifices for the sake of ministering to others, and we need training! God uses suffering to make us be willing and ready to be a part of what He is doing in the lives of others."

And I would add that God uses our sufferings to make our ministry to others more effective and meaningful.

(2 Cor 1:3-9) Read 3-7

The obvious principle in this narrative is that the comfort we receive from God in the midst of our troubles is meant to be used in ministering that comfort to others. {as it was for Paul, so it is for us!}

Practically, how do I do that?

It gives you a story to tell. A story (not so much about you, but about God and His faithfulness)

(Read 8-10)

4. God is Teaching Us that this Life is not Our Final Stop

By nature, we have a tendency to live out our days as if this life is all there is (here and now mentality).

God has a different focus in mind for us (a destination mentality), and He often uses our sufferings to keep that mentality alive and well in our hearts.

(2 Cor 4:16-5:8)

Tripp, "We are all pilgrims on a great spiritual journey, living in the uncomfortable world of tents and temporary locations. All the hardship and loss we face are designed by God to prepare us for our eternal home. God is working through hardship to pry open our hearts and lessen our hearts from our tight grip on the here and now! He is working to release us from the hope that this present world will ever be the paradise that our hearts long for."

The four general principles to remember as we consider "the comfort in the purposes of God in our suffering."

a) God wants you weak.

- b) God intends to change us.
- c) Preparing you for ministry.
- d) Weaning from the world.

II. Texts that Tell Us What God is Doing in Our Suffering

Now let me qualify that statement. The texts I want to call your attention to are not limiting God to certain activity, as if to say, He is doing these things and no more.

Not at all. He may be doing a myriad of positive/wonderful (though painful) things in the midst of suffering.

What these texts reveal to us are positive/wonderful things He is always doing. If you are confused/bewildered/asking the “why Lord,” “why me,” “why now” questions. These texts have clear/concise answers to those questions (always/any situation)

First (Rom 5:1-5)

Here again, Paul is not calling us to rejoice in the pain of suffering. We rejoice in the three interconnected virtues that God is working in us. (It is the fruit/produce of the suffering not the suffering itself that we rejoice in)

*Endurance/Perseverance

*Character

*Hope

Second (1 Pet 1:3-9)

Note a few encouraging features of these verses as we face the “first” of trials/tribulations/sufferings.

- a) Your purified faith is precious (vs 7a)
- b) Your steadfastness in faith will endure into the future (vs 7b)
- c) Your affections are deepened/stirred/touched in believing (vs 8)
- d) Your salvation is not in question, quite the opposite (vs 9)

As commentary on this text in (1 Pet) we could import Paul’s conclusion in (1 Cor 13:13). “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

Let me say one thing to you brethren. By way of further encouragement/comfort, some of you may think the comfort of this text is not for you. My faith is small/weak, questions. This text doesn’t have anything to do with that. Great Heart/Valiant for Truth kind of faith, or Ready to Halt/Mr. Fearing kind of faith. This text is for you!

Third (Ja 1:2-4)

With that said, we close out our long journey of “Knowing God Through Suffering.”

**There is clarity and comfort in understanding at least the four principles mentioned and these three are crystal clear tools (Rom 5) (1 Pet 1) (Ja 1). For you to know what God is doing when you find yourself in the grip of difficulty.