

# Suffering and the Christian

## I. The Reality of Suffering

As all men are aware, suffering and pain are integral parts of life. In spite of all of our advancements in medicine and science, men still get sick and die, many times with a great deal of suffering. Job spoke of this reality in Job 5:7 where he says, “**Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward.**” and in Job 14:1 where he says, “**Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble.**” Moses echoed this sentiment in Psalm 90:10 where he writes, “**The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.**” Suffering, then, is part of everyday, normal life.

However, for the believer there is an additional element to this suffering. We not only suffer because suffering is part of life, we also suffer as a result of our Christian testimony. Christ told His disciples in John 16:33, “**These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.**” Christ is telling His disciples that the world, that is, the godless system headed by Satan, will cause tribulation for believers. We are not part of the system, and as such we fall under the scorn of the system. Paul echoes this same idea in 2 Timothy 3:12, “**Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.**” So as believers our suffering is two-fold. One, we suffer because of our humanness, and secondly we suffer because of our un-humanness. Either way, we suffer.

We need to take this lesson to heart. Too many times we are told by those on “Christian TV” that when we suffer it is because we are outside of the will of God or that we lack sufficient faith to be an overcomer. Not so! In fact, if I read the Bible correctly, it teaches that if we do not suffer, then it is because we are not living a godly life and confronting the system. Suffering should be a normal part of the Christian life, and if it is missing, it may be that we are not impacting others as we should.

## II. The Roots of Suffering

What are some of the things that cause suffering in the life of the Christian? The following is a representative, not exhaustive, list that will help us understand some of the reasons we suffer.

### A. The Fallenness of Nature - Romans 8:19-23 and Genesis 3:17-19

One of the results of the fall of man was the subjection of creation to bondage and corruption. In Genesis 3:17-19 Adam is told, “**Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.**” Because of this we sometimes suffer because we live in a fallen world. Earthquakes, natural disasters, famines, and disease are part of the curse levied on nature due to the fall of man. Only when God reverses the curse will this cause of suffering cease to exist.

In Romans 8:20 Paul tells us that the creation was made subject to futility and decay as a result of man's sin. God created a perfect world, without decay, but as a result of Adam's sin, death, disease, and suffering entered our existence. Only in Revelation 21:4, in the new heaven and earth, will there be no more death, suffering, sorrow, and pain.

B. Our Flesh - Romans 7:18-21, 7:5, and 13:14

Christians also suffer because of the flesh. This is one area of struggle that the unbeliever does not have. We fight our fleshly lusts, the unbeliever succumbs. We fight immorality in our members, the unbeliever does not. All of our life, we fight our flesh. This is what Paul was talking about in Romans 7 where he describes the battle between the sin principle in his flesh, and the spirit principle in his inner man. Until the day of our death, we will struggle in this area.

The idea here is that without the principle of the Spirit of life within a man there is no struggle. Those that are outside of Christ do not have a new creation of God within them to battle the flesh, and since there are no combatants, there is no war. Paul says in Romans 8:5 that those who live after the flesh, mind the things of the flesh, and those after the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. A person who is an unbeliever walks according to his flesh and is characterized by the things of the flesh.

This struggle is very intense at times. In fact it is so intense that we find ourselves saying with Paul in 2 Corinthians 9:27 that we "**buffet our body daily to bring it into subjection.**" Paul is literally saying that he "beats himself" in order to overcome the flesh. This struggle produces pain and suffering in the life of the believer. Only at death or the rapture will this conflict be resolved.

C. Satan - Job 1-2, 2 Corinthians 12:7, Revelation 2:9-10, and Luke 21:31-32

Another cause of suffering in the life of the believer is Satan. Satan desires to have and destroy the testimony of believers, and as a result he works overtime to do that. In Job 1 and 2 we read of Satan challenging God over Job. He told God that the only reason Job feared God was that God had put a hedge around Job and would not allow Satan to touch him. In response, God removed His protective hand and allowed Job to suffer at the hands of Satan in order to show Satan that men will still fear God even when they don't get anything out of it.

This same attack is going on today. Sometimes Satan buffets believers in order, from God's perspective, to strengthen them. However, many believers do not understand nor do they care for that kind of attention from God. Their first thought is that of escape, not endurance.

What would happen if Job were alive today, and instead of receiving His four friends, he was visited by four well-known TV preachers? The conversation would probably go like this:

Job:           **Job 3:3-7 Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived. Let that day be darkness; let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it. Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it; let a cloud dwell upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it. As for that night, let darkness seize upon it; let it not be joined unto the days of the year,**

**let it not come into the number of the months. Lo, let that night be solitary, let no joyful voice come therein.**

- Shuller: What's this I am hearing. What's your problem Job! You sound like a man with no self-esteem. That's your real problem. You need to quit thinking so badly about yourself and realize that you can overcome in spite of your trials. Have a positive attitude. With an outlook on life like yours, no wonder you have problems. You have such a bad self image, condemning the day of your birth, that God never can help you do anything. Believe in yourself, you are a wonderful person inside. Think positively and you can overcome any trial.
- Job: **Job 5:6-9 Although affliction cometh not forth of the dust, neither doth trouble spring out of the ground; Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward. I would seek unto God, and unto God would I commit my cause: Which doeth great things and unsearchable; marvellous things without number:**
- Hagin: Come on Job, that is a cop-out. God-shmod, your problem is that you lack faith. God doesn't torment His children, he desires their prosperity and health. God used faith to create the world, you can use faith to overcome your tribulations. It is not God's fault that you are suffering, it is because you are not exercising the power of the spoken word and your God-given authority over your trials! Rebuke your trials, believe in the power of faith, and they will flee.
- Job: **Job 10:1-3 My soul is weary of my life; I will leave my complaint upon myself; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. I will say unto God, Do not condemn me; show me wherefore thou contendest with me. Is it good unto thee that thou shouldest oppress, that thou shouldest despise the work of thine hands, and shine upon the counsel of the wicked?**
- Tilton: No Job, you have it all wrong. God does not oppress His children, God desires that they be successful and overcomers. Your problem is that you do not believe in God's laws of prosperity, wealth, health, and success. Believe! Have faith! God wants you healthy, wealthy, and wise. Quite allowing the devil to defeat you. You have within yourself the power to overcome all of your trials, if only you have enough faith. Give me the best gift you can, and I will send you a silver coin anointed with the Holy Spirit that will bring joy and prosperity to your life. Just remember to send the best gift you can, and only God knows what your best gift is!
- Job: **Job 19:2-6 How long will ye vex my soul, and break me in pieces with words? These ten times have ye reproached me: ye are not ashamed that ye make yourselves strange to me. And be it indeed that I have erred, mine error remaineth with myself. If indeed ye will magnify yourselves against me, and plead against me my reproach: Know now that God hath overthrown me, and hath compassed me with his net.**
- Cerullo: Job, your real problem is Satan. He has defeated you and brought all of these trials into your life. You need to join God's victorious army and kick the devil in the butt. Rebuke him as a child of God, and he will flee. Bind him in the power of the Spirit, and he can't affect you. If I

can only touch you Job, I can anoint you with the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome any and all trials. Rex's wife can pull the devil off you, and Pat Robertson can cast him out over the phone. The devil has his talons deep in your flesh, and only an anointing from our hands can remove him and give you victory.

Sound familiar? It should be, because that is what we are being told today. We need to realize that yes, some of our problems are caused by Satan, yet Satan is on God's leash. And any and all trials that come our way via Satan have passed first of all by God, and are intended for our growth and development. The idea to "bind Satan" is ludicrous, since the only being in the universe capable of binding Satan is God, and God has chosen to allow Satan some freedom at this time.

Paul recognized a "**thorn in the flesh**" in 2 Corinthians 12:7 that God allowed in his life in order to teach him that God's grace was sufficient for him. Although Satan was the perpetrator, the reason was for Paul's own good. Paul learned dependence on God, and saw that God's strength is perfected in Paul's weaknesses.

In Revelation 2:9-10 we read that Satan was going to persecute some members of the church at Smyrna. In spite of that persecution, however, God promised a crown of life to those that overcame. Satan again was the perpetrator, but it was God's purposes he was fulfilling.

Finally, in Luke 21:31-32 we read that Satan desired Peter in order to "sift him as wheat." God allowed that, and Peter failed abysmally. However, note that Christ told Peter, "**after you have been converted, strengthen your brethren.**" Although Peter would fail, God allowed that in order to teach him that he cannot depend on his own strength, but must depend on the strength of God.

D. Demonic Attack - 1 Samuel 16:14-16

Linked closely with the above point is that sometimes we suffer as a result of demonic attacks. Demonization, experienced by the demoniac in Mark 5:1ff caused intense suffering in the life of the demoniac. Demons can, and do, cause trials for believers, however they, just like Satan, are on a leash. They, like their master, do God's ultimate bidding.

In 1 Samuel 16:14-16 we read of Saul who was troubled by "**an evil spirit from the Lord.**" That does not mean that God personally sent the evil spirit, but that Saul removed himself from the protection of God thus opening himself up to demonic oppression.

This is the same thing that happens in the lives of believers who live in sin. They open themselves up to divine chastening at the hand of Satan and his demons when they live in sin and come under the judgment of God. In 1 Timothy 1:18-20 Paul turned Hymaneus and Alexander over to Satan "**in order that they may learn not to blaspheme**", and in 1 Corinthians 5 he ordered the Corinthian church to turn the immoral man over to Satan "**for the destruction of the flesh.**" We need to be careful to deal with sin in our lives because if we do not, we can sometimes become objects of attack by Satan and his demons who are being used as instruments of God's judgment.

E. Persecution from the World - John 15:18-25, 1 Peter 1:7

A fifth source of suffering for the Christian is the world. Since we are now members of Christ's kingdom, we have ceased being members of the world system (Colossians 1:13). As a result, we are "traitors" to the world and need to be aware of the persecution to follow.

In John 15:18-25 Christ tells His disciples that since they are no longer part of the world, they will suffer persecution just like Christ suffered persecution. That is part of being a Christian. In 1 Peter 1:7 Peter talks about the "trial of faith" noting that this produces refinement. Whenever we rebuke the world actively by our words, or passively by our lives, we must be ready to endure the consequences. The early Apostles experienced this in Acts where they found themselves the objects of persecution because of the Gospel.

Note that this kind of persecution should be normative for the believer, not abnormal. Many of us do not suffer in this area because we make no waves, our lives do not rebuke the present evil system, and hence we are "one of the boys." God help us be a rebuke to this present evil age and not succumb to the pressure to "hide our light under a bushel."

F. Other Sinners - Psalm 13, Psalm 10, Joshua 7

Sometimes we suffer because of the actions of other sinners. This kind of suffering is very evident in the life of David. For years he suffered at the hands of another sinner, Saul. David did nothing wrong, and on the many occasions when he could have taken revenge, he did not. Yet his life was filled with trouble because of the sin of one other man.

The children of Israel had this same problem in Joshua 7. They had just defeated the large and well-fortified city of Jericho only to get thoroughly beaten at Ai. When Joshua sought the Lord to find out why, he was told there was sin in the camp. The sin of one man, Achan, resulted in the death of many Israelites who in and of themselves did not sin.

G. Our Own Sin - 1 Peter 2:20-21, 4:14-16, Romans 1:27

We also suffer because of our own sin. We need to realize that although God forgives us when we sin, we do not always escape the consequences. It is a bad testimony and folly to think that we are suffering for righteousness on those occasions we are paying the due consequences of our own sin.

Peter, in 1 Peter 2:20-21, tells us that it is virtuous to suffer for doing right, but just when we suffer for doing evil. In vv. 4:14-16 of the same book he tells us that if we suffer as Christians we will receive great commendation from God, but if we suffer as a thief, murderer, or evil-doer, that is not something to be commended. We need to be careful that we not sin in order that we not bring reproach on God when He justly punishes us for our evil.

H. God - Genesis 22

Lastly, we need to recognize that sometimes it is God that brings trials into the lives of believers. Whenever God does that, it is for the express purpose of proving our faith and maturing us as believers. When God finally fulfilled His promises to

Abraham, he told Abraham to take Isaac and offer him as a burnt offering! When Abraham obeyed, his supreme act of faith in God proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was a man of faith. God was testing Abraham to prove his faith.

When God tests us as believers by bringing suffering our way, He may use the world, the flesh, Satan, demons, and many other methods. However, behind any method is the hand of God controlling, restricting, and channeling the suffering in order to accomplish His divine purposes. In Psalm 66:8-12 the Psalmist writes, **“O bless our God, ye people, and make the voice of his praise to be heard: Which holdeth our soul in life, and suffereth not our feet to be moved. For thou, O God, hast proved us: thou hast tried us, as silver is tried. Thou broughtest us into the net; thou laidst affliction upon our loins. Thou hast caused men to ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water: but thou broughtest us out into a wealthy place.”** In spite of the suffering that God brings on His children, He desires to bring them to a “wealthy place”, a place of enrichment.

### III. The Risks of Suffering

We have looked at the reality of suffering and the roots of suffering, now what about the risks of suffering. Suffering can bring a lot of good into our lives if handled correctly, but how do we sometimes handle it incorrectly?

#### A. Seeking Deliverance at all Costs

The first risk of suffering is that we have a tendency to seek deliverance at all costs. No one will argue the fact that suffering is painful and unpleasant, but to seek the easy way out often negates the positive effects of trials and tribulations. Often the best way to deal with trials and suffering is not around, nor over, nor under, but through. In Isaiah 43:2 we read, **“When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.”** Note that it is *through* the waters, *through* the rivers, and *through* the fire, not around, under, or over. God is with us *through*, we are on our own when we go another way.

When Christ prayed to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane He asked that the cup of suffering He was about to face be removed. It was not God’s plan that the cup be removed, that Christ go around the cross, but that He go through the cross. God’s path is through the trial, and only when we go through will His presence be there to sustain and help us face any and all tests.

This is most evident when we face suffering as a result of our sin. In Hebrews 12:5-12 we read of God’s chastening rod that He brings into the lives of His children for their correction and instruction. In verse 12 we read, **“Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.”** When we are chastened by the Lord, it is not pleasant time. Afterward, however, the fruit of righteousness is reaped in our lives because of God’s care. The phrase “fruit of righteousness” could also be rendered “fruit which is righteousness.” Right living and holiness before God is often the result of chastening and discipline. The worst thing you can do for a child is to spare chastening, and the worst thing God can do for His children is to spare the rod. When we face affliction because of sin in our lives, the easiest path through is to cooperate with God, not fight against His correction.

B. Concentrating on the Cause Rather Than the Result

Another risk of suffering is to spend too much time concentrating on the cause rather than the result. When we make mistakes, make bad decisions, or commit sin it is easy to spend an inordinate amount of time crying about “spilled milk” rather than seeing the mistake as “water over the dam.” It is not that we ignore what happened, but that we mark it up to experience and keep on going. Many Christians find themselves wiped out by trials because they keep asking themselves, “What if?” We need to learn from our mistakes, not constantly relive them.

This happens a lot when marriages dissolve in divorce. We ask, “What if I tried just a little harder?” “What if I would have sought help sooner?” “What if I would have prayed more?” “What if I would have given in more?” and the list goes on and on and on. When we find ourselves in a bad situation because of our own sin, or the sin of others, we cannot dwell too much on the cause because we will then never see the solution, and we will almost surely not learn the lesson we need to learn.

Paul could have done this. If there was anyone who could have dwelled in the past it was Paul. Before his conversion it was his life’s goal to kill and imprison as many Christians as he could, and on several occasions he succeeded. However, in Philippians 3:13-14 he writes, **“Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”** He could have dwelled on the past, but he chose to live in the future.

Peter could have done this. The night of Christ’s betrayal, the night Peter could have proven his love for the Lord, he bombed big time. Instead of following Christ to the death he was shamed by a servant girl and two others. That would have devastated many Christians, but not Peter. He took that lesson to heart, and when he had gone through it, he was able to help others who were facing much bigger trials under the persecutions of Nero.

As an aside we also need to make a warning at this point to those who help others relive their mistakes. Many parents constantly remind their children of errors in the past, errors that may have occurred so long ago that the exact details of the situation are no longer known. Some friends constantly remind us of our past mistakes, “Remember when you....” We may have friends who want to constantly live in the past and moan and groan about past mistakes. If we do, we need to help them remember that the real issue is not “Why am I here,” but “Where am I going?” Let us learn from our past mistakes, but not live them over and over again.

C. Skipping Class

A third risk of suffering is to “skip class.” By this we mean that instead of attempting to learn from the situation, we endure it without ever desiring to find out what God wants to tell us. There is a virtue in asking “Why?”

We need to realize that **“all things work together for good to them that love God.”** All means all! Nothing comes into the life of the believer that in some way is not put there by the sovereign hand of God. Therefore, any trial faced, small or large, has a purpose and a reason.

James speaks to this in James 1:2-5 where he writes, **“My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing. If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.”** James is saying that when we fall into various tests we need to consider it joy knowing that it will bring us to maturity. The problem is that when we face trials we may not know what it is God is trying to teach us. That is why we are enjoined to ask for wisdom. This wisdom is not wisdom in the general sense, but in the specific sense, in this case, the wisdom to understand the *why* of a trial. God desires that we understand the *why*, because when we understand the *why*, then it is easier to gain the maximum benefit from the test.

However, we need to make an important note at this point, and that is that many times we do not know the *why* immediately. For example, Joseph was sold into slavery while a young teenager, rose to prominence in the house of Potiphar, found himself in prison because of a false accusation, and wasn't called before the Pharaoh until he was almost thirty. In other words, he did not know the *why* of his trial for many years. But then, when he was thirty, he was promoted from a common prisoner to the prime minister of Egypt and the *why* of his trial became evident, he was chosen by God to save his father, his brothers, and all of their families during a great famine. God's hand was there, it just wasn't seen for a while.

Take the case of the man born blind in John 9. For over thirty years this man suffered as a blind beggar, unable to work for a living. No doubt he was the brunt of many false accusations since it was assumed by all, and even by the disciples, that somehow this man sinned or his parents sinned for him to be born blind. However, Jesus blows this all away when he says in John 9:3, **“Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.”** In other words Christ told his disciples that the *why* of this man's blindness for over thirty years was that God's works would be manifest. Just think of that! For over thirty years this one man suffered just so that Christ could work the miracle of restoring his sight. This man's *why* took thirty years to answer.

Fanny J. Crosby was only a little girl when a doctor put a poultice on her eyes that blinded her for life. Why was she blinded for over ninety years of her life? A partial answer is found in the many songs she wrote, *To God Be The Glory, Praise Him!, Praise Him!, Tell Me the Story of Jesus, Rescue the Perishing, Jesus is Calling, Pass Me Not, Blessed Assurance, Close to Thee, Near the Cross*, and hundreds more. The *why* of her suffering lives on.

The issue is not that we always know the *why* when we want it, but to rest assured in the God who knows the *why*, and realize that even if we never know the *why* in this life, we will in the next.

#### D. Acting in the Flesh Rather Than Acting in the Spirit

A fourth risk of suffering is to act in the flesh rather than in the Spirit. Someone once said that trials do not make a man as much as they reveal a man. Religion is not what a man does Sunday morning, but what he does when he hits the wrong nail with a hammer, or when he finds out that he has inoperable cancer. Trials reveal our character.



Take for example Saul in the Old Testament. God tested him by giving him a great victory over the Amalekites, only to have Saul fail by not obeying God's command to utterly destroy the enemy. God tested Peter by allowing Satan to "sift him as wheat," only to result in the complete failure of Peter when Peter acted in the flesh. We need to realize that whenever we react in the flesh, we are sinning against God.

What should we do when faced with a trial? Freak out? Blow our cool? Go to pieces? No! We need to turn to God who has the answers and can help us to walk in the Spirit so that we do not fulfill the lusts of the flesh. When Paul was struck by a servant of the high priest his fleshly response resulted in that he had to apologize for speaking out against the High Priest. Acting in the flesh causes us nothing but trouble.

Cain acted in the flesh. When confronted by the fact that his sacrifice was not accepted and Abel's was, he acted in anger rising up and killing his brother. God warned him about this reaction in Genesis 4:7 **"If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him."** In other words, if Cain would make the right response of bringing an acceptable sacrifice, he would be accepted by God. If however, he refused, sin lied at the door and was ready to pounce on him. For any trial there is one right response and many wrong responses. May we be wise and choose right.

E. Becoming Bitter

A fifth risk of suffering is that we turn our anger inward and become bitter. This most often happens when we suffer as a result of someone else's sin or when we suffer because of the vicissitudes of life.

A clear example of this is what usually happens when someone finds themselves the victim in a divorce. Instead of forgiving their ex-spouse, they become bitter and angry. Over time this bitterness becomes deep-seated and the least little touch will set someone off. An innocent remark, a reminder of the ex-spouse, an anniversary or a birthday, can be the cause of a volcanic eruption to rival that of Mount St. Helens. People like this often find themselves without a lot of friends, because their unstable and eruptive behaviour makes others nervous to be in their presence. The least little comment or action can result in a verbal barrage of anger and abuse found only on the docks when a stevedore finds his foot under a hundred-pound crate.

We need to realize that bitterness is a sin before God, and something for which we are fully responsible (1 Peter 3:1, Colossians 3:8, Hebrews 12:14-15). We cannot control how others treat us, but we can control how we treat them. We can't control their actions, but we can control ours. Bitterness is the result of an unforgiving spirit, and something that should be completely foreign to a Christian. In Matthew 18:19-35 we read of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. It is about a servant who owed his master an unpayable debt, equivalent to billions of our own dollars, and was forgiven that debt because his master had compassion on him. However, even though he was forgiven this huge debt, he was unwilling to forgive another man who owed him only a few dollars. We have been forgiven an unpayable debt of sin by God, can we do any less than forgiving others of their sin to us?

When we become bitter because of our trials, we remove ourselves from the sphere of God's blessing and open ourselves up to His chastening rod of discipline. Bitterness rarely hurts the person who was the cause, but it always hurts the person who is bitter. When we have bitterness in our hearts we cannot be used by God, and it won't be long before we find ourselves in the cupboard, unused because of sin.

How can we tell if we are bitter towards someone? Take the following test and see where you place:

- Can you rejoice in the good fortune of someone who has hurt you?
- Can someone mention the name of the person who has hurt you without it causing you to respond in anger?
- Can you talk to the person who has hurt you without thinking about how nice it would be to choke them to death?
- Can you love the person who has hurt you even if they do not love you in return?
- Can you say that you have unconditionally forgiven the person who has brought you pain?
- Can you honestly say that you would not hurt the person who has hurt you even if you have a golden opportunity to do so?

How about bitterness towards the vicissitudes of life?

- If we had our choice, would we go through the same trial again if it were God's will?
- Can we rest in the assurance that God is in control even though we do not know the *why* of what has happened?
- Are we living in joy in spite of our circumstances?

Bitterness is a sin, and only when we deal with it as a sin, will we find deliverance and joy in the Holy Spirit.

F. Failing to Depend on the Power of God

A sixth risk of suffering is that we fail to depend on the power of God and the fact that God is in control of our situation. When we truly understand the sovereignty of God, we can rest assured that everything is "on schedule" in our lives.

In the book of Esther we read of the evil plan of Haman to destroy all of the Jews in the Persian Empire. The book of Esther is interesting because the name of God does not appear except in acrostic form one time. However, throughout the book we see the sovereign hand of God as He directed the events in order to bring about the deliverance of the Jews. To Mordecai and Esther the suffering and trials were real, however God was always there, in the background, orchestrating all of the events.

So it is in our own lives. When we walk in the Spirit we have the assurance of God's protective care and sovereign control. In Romans 8:28 we read that "**all things work together for good to them that love God.**" This means that all good things, all bad things, all evil things, everything, works out for our own good because it is God who is there to make sure that it does.

When we face trials we need to realize that God is there with us, and He will not allow us to be tested beyond our ability, but will always make a way of escape (1 Corinthians 13:10). God knows our limits, and no trial is ever more than we can endure, if we depend on the power of God in our lives.

G. Becoming Angry with God

Finally, becoming angry with God is a risk of suffering. This usually arises because we feel that since God is sovereign, which means He is in control of everything, then He could stop our suffering if He wanted. When He does not, we become angry and bitter.

Take a look at the prophet Jonah. God told him to go to Nineveh and preach repentance, an idea that did not sit well with Jonah since he desired that God wipe that city out. As a result, he went the other way only to find himself the unwilling passenger of a fish, which took him back where God wanted him anyway. After he preached repentance, and the city repented, he went outside the city to see what would happen. As Jonah sat there, God prepared a vine to grow and give him shade. The next day, however, God caused a worm to smite the vine so that it withered. Jonah was furious, and told God that it would be better that he die rather than suffer in the desert without shade. God then asked, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" "Yes!" was Jonah's reply, "even to death." You see, Jonah's response to the trial was anger towards God, and sometimes our response to trials is anger towards God. God was trying to teach Jonah a lesson, one that he did not learn because of his anger. It is much better to cooperate with God, than fight against Him.

Being angry with God is a no-win situation. We read in Revelation 16:8-9 we read that God causes the sun to become exceedingly hot so that men are scorched with the heat. What is their response? Blaspheming and cursing rather than repentance. When we are angry with God because of trials we take our stand with those who would blaspheme and curse God as well as with those who would say that they know better than God.

IV. The Results of Suffering

A. Trials Test the Strength of our Faith

The first result of suffering is that our faith is tested, not as much for God's sake, as it is for ours. When Job was going through his affliction he had to come to grips with his faith in God. One of the strongest things he said is found in Job 13:15 where we read, "**Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him.**" Job believed in God even if God took his life. That is faith.

What we fail to realize is that faith is a muscle, and just as a muscle will atrophy over time, so our faith will atrophy unless exercised. As we face trials and suffering in our life, and see God work through them, we learn to trust in Him even

when what is going on runs counter to logic and our own agenda. Habakkuk faced this problem in his own times. The nation of Judah was given over to idolatry and sin, and in confusion and bewilderment Habakkuk cries out to God and asks Him what He is going to do about it. God answers, but not in the way Habakkuk thought He would. God said that He was going to bring in the Chaldeans to destroy the wicked Jewish nation. This was not in Habakkuk's repertoire of solutions. Judah was evil, but Babylon was a lot worse. It does not make sense to punish a more righteous nation with one that is very wicked. Well, in our minds it is not, but God knows what He is doing, and in the end Habakkuk rested in this fact. In the final verses of Habakkuk we read **"Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places."** Habakkuk came to the point that although the natural order of things might unravel, he would trust in God.

In James 1:3 we read that the **"trying of our faith worketh patience."**, and in verse 2 we read that we are to **"count it all joy when we fall into various trials."** Don't miss the connection. What James is saying is that when we fall into various trials, our faith is being tried. Trials exercise our faith. Asking God to increase our faith sometimes means that the heat goes up in our lives. We don't like that, and often question God, but the divine equation still requires that faith is increased through suffering and trials. That is a fact we cannot escape.

B. Trials Humble Us

One of the most detestable things in God's sight is a proud person. In Proverbs 6:16-17 we read, **"These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood."** Number one on the list is a proud look!

What is pride? We know from Isaiah 14:12-14 that pride is the original sin of Satan, the one that caused his fall. Instead of being what God had created him to be, he wanted something "better." That better was exaltation, even to the point of exaltation over God Himself. Pride, then, is an attitude of self-centeredness, a high opinion of oneself, one's abilities, or one's looks. The proud person sees themselves as "better" than anyone else. In fact, the Greek word is *huperepiphania*, which means "to place oneself over." A corresponding word is *tuphoo*, which means to be "puffed up with smoke." The proud person always thinks of themselves more highly than they ought to think.

The reason this causes so much trouble is that the person who is proud can see only themselves. The whole world revolves around them, and anything or anyone that gets in the way of their own pursuits is subjected to their wrath. They are enamoured with their own pursuits, their own agenda, and their own well-being. They overlook their faults, and magnify the faults of others. When anyone tells them of some problem they may have, it is explained away or ignored. A proud person can be spotted by finding the person who always has to be the center of attention, the one always in control of a conversation.

On the other hand, we as believers are to not mind our own things, but the things of others (Philippians 2:3-4). Instead of looking out for "Number 1", we need to look out for others. Instead of focusing on our needs, we need to focus on the needs of

others. Ingrown-eyeballs is a deadly disease, and only by cultivating a concern and care for others can the sin of pride be dealt with. In Romans 12:3 we are told, **“For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.”** Paul’s point is that we need to realize that each one of us has been given a place in the body of Christ, and a set of gifts and talents for the purpose of serving Him. It is not proper to be proud about something over which we had no choice to begin with. God has graciously and sovereignly dealt to each man a measure of faith, and we need to see God as the source of that faith instead of thinking that we are something. In Galatians 6:3 we are told, **“For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself.”** Proud people are self-deceived.

Christ exemplified humility by laying aside the robes of glory and becoming a man, and further dying the death of a common criminal! Christ did not consider His own needs, but the needs of mankind. He did not come to be served, but to serve and give His life a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28). He did not come to have His feet washed, but to wash the feet of others (John 13). And He did not come to live for Himself, but to die for us. Christ was not preoccupied with Himself, but was consumed over the needs of others.

As we face trials and testing, we learn that we cannot depend on ourselves. The man who trusts in his riches may find them gone one day. The man who trusts in his strength may find himself the victim of a stroke or accident that keeps him crippled the rest of his life. The man who trusts in great fame may be an unknown scant years later. In fact, in James 1 we read that suffering brings trials into the life of the rich and poor alike. No amount of money can buy health, or happiness, or contentment. Trusting in the passing things of life cause us problems big-time because they are fleeting.

In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul talks about his **“thorn in the flesh.”** The reason God put this thorn into Paul’s life is so that he would not be **“exalted above measure.”** In other words, the thorn kept Paul humble. Sometimes we have thorns in our lives to keep us humble. God cannot use someone who trusts in themselves, He can only use those who trust in Him.

If we are proud, we can be certain that God will bring suffering our way to break us of pride. God cannot allow his children to trust in their own resources and ignore others. Christianity is an other-centered way of life, and if we are not living it the way we should, we open ourselves up to suffering.

### C. Trials Wean Us From Worldly Things

A third result of suffering is that it weans us from worldly things. As believers, our home is not here, but there. Our treasure is not to be here, but there. When we go through trials and suffering we are reminded that the things of this world cannot bring true pleasure and happiness.

A good question to ask ourselves is, “If I lost everything I owned, what would I lose?” A newspaper article related an incident in which a man and his wife were involved in a serious auto accident. Shortly after the screech of tires and the sound of crumpling metal, the man crawled out of the car saying, “Everything is all right, I got it, everything is OK.” In his hand he held a briefcase with a few-hundred

dollars, in the remains of the car his wife breathed her last. What did he have and what did he lose?

When Donna, my wife, was rushed to the hospital because of a *grand mal* seizure, the things we had in this life meant very little. The only thing that mattered was her. Cars can be replaced, people cannot. Homes can be replaced, people cannot. Things can be replaced, people cannot. We cannot be like the man who was hard of hearing. A mugger pointed a gun at him and said, "Your money or your life." After a moments hesitation, the man said, "You can have my wife, I'll keep the money."

As believers we are commanded in Matthew 6:19-21 to have our treasure in heaven. Instead of following our Lord's instructions, we often have our treasure here on earth. It is not that riches are bad, but that they steal our affection from God. In Hebrews 11:24-26 we read that Moses did not consider the treasures of Egypt greater than obedience to God. Moses had it all! But he gladly traded it for true riches that fade not away.

One of the marks of the church in the last days according to Revelation 3:14ff is a false sense of value. The Church at Laodicea thought they had real wealth, but they are exhorted to trade it for gold that will not perish, and raiment that will not pass away. Thomas Aquinas was walking with the Pope through the Papal gardens when he was told, "See, no longer can the church say 'silver and gold have I none'". "True", said Aquinas, "but neither can she say, 'rise up and walk'". Our tendency, especially in an affluent society like ours, is to depend on our wealth, assets, and insurance policies instead of trusting on God. Sometimes the trials we face are put there by the sovereign hand of God to remind us that our treasure is in heaven, not on the earth.

#### D. Trials Call Us to an Eternal Hope

A fourth result of trials is that we are reminded of our eternal hope. If the Christian life was one of ease, wealth, and prosperity, we would not want to leave. After all, who wants to go to heaven, a place that one has never seen, when one has it all down here? We are reminded of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19 that traded his wealth for hell, instead of his wealth for heaven.

This is an important result of trials because it has reached the point in America where heaven has lost its luster. We are so enamoured of what we have here, and the possibilities here, that the thought of heaven is like throwing someone into cold water. We are told on Christian "TV" that God want's us to have it here while we are seldom reminded that our true treasure is in heaven. Dave Hunt has written an excellent book called *Whatever Happened to Heaven*. In that book he discusses this mindset where heaven has taken a back seat to prosperity and the thought of "taking over the world for Christ." This world is not our home, we are just passing through.

This was not a problem with the early church. Because of the intense persecutions they were facing, the hope of heaven is what kept them going when everything else was lost. In fact, I almost believe Paul looked forward to his execution with anticipation realizing that at last he would see his Savior face to face. In Romans 8:18 we read that the "**sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory that shall be revealed in us.**" In other words, if we added up all the suffering in this life, and compared it to the glory to be revealed in the next, there would be no comparison at all. In 2 Corinthians 4:17 we are told that our "**light**

**affliction which is but for a moment worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”** When will that glory be revealed? In heaven, not here.

Last century, Horatio G. Spafford sent his wife and two daughters away on a ship to America. When the ship had gotten out into the ocean, a fierce storm arose that sank the ship. His wife was saved, but both daughters were lost. When Horatio heard the news, he took up a pen, and wrote a hymn that blesses us today. Listen as he reminds us of our eternal hope in spite of the trials of life.

When peace like a river attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll,  
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, tho' trials should come,  
Let this blest assurance control,  
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,  
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin, O the bliss of this glorious thought,  
My sin, not in part, but the whole,  
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul.

And, Lord, haste the day, when my faith shall be sight,  
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll,  
The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend,  
Even so, it is well with my soul.

E. Trials Reveal What We Really Love

A fifth result of trials and suffering is that they reveal what we really love. Many say that they love their families, but when a trial hits they run away. Many say that they truly love the Lord, but when suffering comes, they bail out. Suffering has a way of clarifying things and showing us what we really think is important.

In Matthew 26:33 we read that Peter promised the Lord that if everyone else would bail out, he never would. Thirty-six verses later we find Peter warming his hands and denying the Lord three times. The trials showed Peter what he really loved, himself. Fortunately, Peter took this lesson to heart, and after he was converted, he strengthened his brethren.

In the Parable of the Sower we are told of four types of soil: hard, rocky, weedy, and good. When Christ explained the parable to His disciples, He told them that the weedy soil represented those **“that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful.”** In other words, the riches of this life become the preoccupation with people characterized by this soil so that they lose their eternal perspective. Although I believe this passage is talking about unbelievers, the message is still pertinent to believers. Many of us have become idolatrous in that we love the wrong things. In Colossians 3:1-2 we are told, **“If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.”** The point is clear, our affections need to be set on eternal things, not worldly things.

F. Trials Teach Us To Value God's Blessings

Undoubtedly, one of the most prevalent problems with people today is their lack of gratitude. This has even leaked into the church where we find many believers who are not grateful to God for what He has given them or done for them. We are constantly being told that we deserve more, that we need to demand more from God, and if we don't have everything we want it is because we lack faith.

That is hogwash! One of the benefits of suffering is that it teaches us to value God's blessings. We must realize that we do not deserve any good thing from the hand of God, only evil. Once we get that into our heads, we are then grateful for any good thing that God has given us since it is undeserved.

A good example of this is the wanderings of Israel in the wilderness. Imagine being an Israelite under the leadership of Moses. You have just been released from a life of slavery to find yourself on the shore of the Red Sea with the Egyptian army behind you. You watch as the pillar of fire protects you from the army while the breath of God parts the sea. After you have walked through the midst of the sea, on dry land, you watch the entire Egyptian army drown from the lowliest soldier to the great Pharaoh. Next you watch as God miraculously provides water and food in the desert. And then, you complain because you do not have any meat to eat! You accuse Moses of bringing you out of Egypt to die in the wilderness.

But, you say, I would never have done that. OK, what about complaining about your station in life, your job, your car, your home, your spouse, your ex-spouse, your kids, your health problems, and the list could go on and on and on. Even with the minor inconveniences of life, we as believers have been blessed with spiritual blessings beyond comprehension. By setting our affections on the things which are above, the minor inconveniences of life do not look as bad. Sometimes, our trials are put there by God to teach us of the value of His blessings. Martha Snell Nicholson puts it this way:

Guests

Pain knocked upon my door and said  
That she had come to stay,  
And though I would not welcome her  
But bade her go away,  
She entered in.  
Like my own shade  
She followed after me,  
And from her stabbing, stinging sword  
No moment was I free.  
And then one day another knocked  
Most gently at my door.  
I cried, "No, Pain is living here,  
There is not room for more."  
And then I heard His tender voice,  
"Tis I, be not afraid."  
And from the day He entered in,  
The difference it made!

G. Trials Enable Us To Help Others



Probably no trial in life is worse than being comforted by someone who has no idea of what it is you are going through. We want to cry like Job, **"I have heard many such things: miserable comforters are ye all."** On the other hand, nothing is so wonderful as to have a friend walk with us through our trial who knows the way, since they have walked that very same path before.

In Hebrews 4:15 we read, **"For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin."**, and in Hebrews 2:17-18, **"Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted."** It is a wonderful thought to know that we do not serve a God who has no idea of what it is like to be a human and suffer. Our God did suffer, and in fact, suffered more than any other man that ever lived. Christ is a faithful and compassionate mediator for us, since He knows what it is like. No one can say to Him, "You don't know what it is like to be rejected by everyone" since Isaiah 53:3 tells us **"He is despised and rejected of men."** No one can say to Him, "You don't know what it is like to be betrayed by someone close to you" since in Psalm 41:9 we are told, **"Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me."** No one can say to Him, "You don't know what it is like to be punished for something you did not do" since we read in 1 Peter 2:23-24 **"Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed."** Christ suffered it all, and because of that He is able to help us when we suffer as well.

The same holds true of ourselves. Every trial we go through broadens our ministry in that we can help others who are going through or facing the same trial. In 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 Paul writes, **"Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God."** Paul is telling us that the same comfort we receive from God as we face our own trials is the comfort we can share with others as they face those same trials.

#### H. Trials Produce Endurance and Strength

We don't really have to say much on this since we have already covered this concept when we saw that trials test and strengthen our faith. Nevertheless, this is one of the primary reasons for suffering.

When I was going through grade school, I remember something called "math problems." I really didn't have a lot of trouble with these until I got to college where my brain short-circuited on multi-dimensional calculus. However, in grade school I remember being given a page full of equations and problems to complete many a time, and the reason for this is that practice is required to learn math. It does a person very little good to sit down and theoretically learn math if they never are called upon to complete a problem. Only as the homework is done will one's understanding of math increase.

The same is true in sports. Those that excel are not the ones that feel no discomfort, no pain. A football player who learns all the plays and is afraid of being hit is not much of a player. A weight-lifter who never lifts any more weight than what will cause no pain will never be a champion lifter. A basketball player who never wants to get winded will never be a star. So also in life, pain is required to produce character, endurance, and strength.

The reason many young people grow up today as moral and social wrecks is that they have been isolated from any pain. It seems that one of the first laws of child-rearing is to reduce all the pain we can. This is not good. We must allow our children to suffer the consequences of bad decisions if they are to ever learn the necessary skills required to live a moral life. Suffering in life teaches us values.

In James 1:2-4 we read, **“My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.”** James is telling us that the product of suffering is endurance, the ability to bear up under adversity and difficulty. Our problem is that we want to enjoy the fruit of suffering, without the suffering. We want to enjoy the fruits of labor, without the labor. This is not possible in the spiritual realm. God has designed that we learn endurance and strength by facing trials, and only when we learn to depend on Him, can those trials be faced successfully.

#### I. Trials Produce Future Glory

The final result of suffering is that it produces eternal glory. God has decreed that the path to glory is through the valley of suffering. In Romans 8:18 we read that the **“sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory that shall be revealed in us.”**, and in 2 Corinthians 4:17 we are told that our **“light affliction which is but for a moment worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”**

Stop and think about that! Our light affliction (eternally speaking) works for us an exceeding eternal weight of glory to be revealed in heaven. Peter echoes this in 1 Peter 1:7 where he writes, **“That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.”** When will our praise, honor, and glory be revealed? At the return of Christ. In fact, I believe that this glory will be such that we will ask God, **“Why didn’t I suffer more?”**

In Hebrews 12:2 we read of Christ **“who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.”** Christ’s endurance of the cross was made possible, in part, by the anticipation of future glory. He said this for Himself in John 17:5 **“And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.”** Also, this was foretold by the prophets. In 1 Peter 1:11 we read, **“Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.”** God’s formula, first suffering, then glory.