

Suffering: Benefits?

(PART 2)

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If you were here with us last Sunday morning, then you know that we looked at the topic of suffering. Specifically, we looked at the challenging question that some will ask of the Christian faith: If God is truly good, and if God is all-powerful, then why does God allow seemingly innocent people to suffer? Some, of course, have suggested that God does not exist, and this is their argument. Either God is too weak to stop the suffering we see around us, or he either causes it or permits it because he enjoys it in some way. Either way, as some have suggested, God is certainly not worthy of our worship.

Last week, though, we looked at the Scriptures, and we discovered that most if not all human suffering can in some way be tied back to the fact that God created the human race with free will, with the ability to freely choose between right and wrong, and with that freedom comes the possibility for making wrong choices. And those wrong choices have introduced great pain and even death into this world. Today, therefore, we suffer because of our own personal choices, we suffer because of the wrong choices that are made by others, we suffer because of the wrong choices made by previous generations, we suffer because we in some way violate the very basic laws of nature, and then there are many situations where we may never know the reason why we suffer. Sometimes bad things just happen. Sometimes things happen at random. Sometimes suffering happens because of one of those previous reasons, but we just don't know it at the time. But the purpose of our study last week was to point out that suffering is not to automatically be blamed on God.

This morning, I would like for us to move ahead in this series of lessons, and I would like for us to take a few moments this morning to study some of the BENEFITS of suffering. And I know that our first reaction might be, "Wait a minute!" I mean, who could possibly suggest that there could ever be any kind of an upside to any kind of pain? We think of those we know and love, we think of what we personally have endured through the years, we think of us, here in this room – we have members here today who have suffered terribly, even recently. Some have been in the hospital, some here this morning are dealing with excruciating pain – just sitting in a pew hurts, getting in and out of a car hurts, walking around hurts. So, we realize that all of us are touched by pain and suffering in one way or another. We do not like to suffer. However, I want us to go back to the Bible this morning as we discover some of what God says about the VALUE of suffering. And, as with our lesson last week, this is not meant as any kind of a quick or flippant response to the pain any of us may be going through right now. When we see someone suffer, we cannot say, "Oh, this is why...!" Some of what we are about to learn may not apply to your situation right now. Some of it might not make sense until many

years later. But again, knowing that God knows what is best, I want us to at least do a brief overview of some benefits of suffering according to the word of God.

I. **And as we begin, I would point out (first of all), that suffering has a way of BUILDING CHARACTER – ENDURANCE, PATIENCE, WISDOM – however we describe it, suffering can in some ways MAKE US STRONGER.**

I would invite you to turn with me to James 1 as we consider one of the most plainly stated benefits of suffering anywhere in the Bible – James 1:2-4 (p. 1887). I know at first, when we speak of suffering having any kind of benefit, it just sounds wrong. How could anything good come from suffering? James was writing a group of Christians who were being persecuted for their faith. They were going through a series of trials. Notice, please, James 1:2-4, where James opens the book and says, ***“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”*** So we notice here that trials have a way of leading to endurance. Suffering, then, has a way of building character. Suffering has a way of making us stronger.

Let me give some examples from the natural world. Think for just a moment about the trees we see all around us. Many years ago, I learned something valuable from brother Randy Illg who serves as one of the elders at the church where I grew up. Randy is retired as a horticulture professor from a college down in the Chicago area, and many years ago, I remember talking to Randy about some of the fruit trees we were planting at the time, and I remember Randy saying that one of the worst things you can do for a tree is to stake it. There might be some rare case where a tree might need some extra support, but generally speaking, it is best for a tree to take some abuse from the wind, because wind has a way of making that tree stronger. We do the same thing with our seedlings. Over at our house right now, I’m in the middle of putting several flats of little seedlings out in the sun and wind each day. I had them out yesterday for about an hour. And some of you know why we do this – those seedlings need to be strengthened! They can’t just go from a heated mat and a fluorescent light right out into the real world, but they need to be eased into it. They need some stress to make them stronger. Suffering, then, has a way of building character – not only physically, but spiritually as well.

II. **Secondly, I would also suggest that in some circumstances, suffering can ultimately lead to GREATER BLESSINGS IN THE FUTURE.**

And for this, we turn to Romans 8:28 (p. 1769). We need to be careful with this verse, because as we are going through something, it may be pretty easy for somebody to say, “God is causing this terrible event for some good reason” (this can certainly be abused), but let us notice what Paul actually says here in Romans 8:28, ***“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”*** I would point out, first of all, that Paul does not say that God causes all things. As we learned last week, we usually suffer because somebody made a choice somewhere down the line. However, once the suffering has happened, once those choices have been made, we find in this passage that God is often able to work those circumstances ***“together for good.”*** Not that God necessarily causes bad things to happen to us!

In the Bible, we think of Joseph. If Joseph had never been sold into slavery, falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife, and thrown into prison, would he ever have been lifted up to a position in Egypt that would have allowed him to save his family and the entire Hebrew nation? Not that God caused him to be sold and falsely accused, not that God caused those bad things to happen, but when others made those choices leading to Joseph’s

suffering, God took those events and used them for a good purpose. Many years later, looking back on his life, and speaking to his brothers, Joseph was able to say in Genesis 50:20, ***“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.”*** Again, God did not cause those bad things to happen, but God used those choices made by others in a powerful way.

We think of Daniel. Where would Daniel have been if he had not been captured and taken away into Babylonian Captivity? Would he have ever had the opportunity to speak of God before pagan kings? Where would Zaccheus be if he had been just a little bit taller? What if Zaccheus had been 6’ tall? Would he have ever had a meal with the Lord? What about the blind man in John 9? Would he have ever come to know the Lord if he had not been born blind? What about the woman who touched the edge of Jesus’ robe? Would she have ever come to know the Lord if she had not suffered the flow of blood for twelve years? Would the centurion have ever come to know Jesus if his son had not been paralyzed? What about the apostle Paul? In Philippians 1, Paul says, ***“Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.”*** So, here he is under house arrest, chained to Roman soldiers, and later in the book, Paul basically says, “My guards, the elite Praetorian Guard, the Secret Service, your new brothers in Christ, told me to tell all of you ‘Hello!’” [Philippians 4:22; paraphrased]. Not that God caused Paul to be sent to Rome under heavy guard, not that God caused Paul to suffer in that way, but God used those experiences for the greater good, even to the point where it appears that Paul’s own guards obeyed the gospel.

We think of Booker T. Washington who coined the phrase, “the advantage of disadvantage.” That is what we are talking about here. Sometimes the bad things that happen to us can actually lead us to greater blessings a little bit further down the road. We even see this in the secular world. Did you know that the modern concept of a snowmobile was invented by a guy up in Vilas County, Wisconsin, who injured his foot back in 1924? Here is this guy with a bum leg, and he was getting left behind by his hunting buddies. He needed a way to get around, so he mounted a boat motor on a toboggan along with a pair of skis and some old bike parts. He got a patent for a “Motor Toboggan” in 1927. The Army got a hold of the idea during WWII, and demand really took off from there. It all started when Carl Eliason hurt his foot and couldn’t keep up with his hunting buddies. The point is: Sometimes, sometimes suffering can lead to much greater blessings down the road, and if this is true in the secular world, it is even more true for those of us as Christians who have that promise from God in Romans 8:28.

III. There is a third possible benefit to pain and suffering, and that is: PAIN HAS A WAY OF TEACHING; in fact, PAIN HAS A WAY OF PREVENTING FUTURE SUFFERING.

And this is true spiritually as well as physically. In just a moment, we will be looking at Psalm 119:71 (p. 978). But as we make our way to that passage, for just a moment, I want us to try to imagine a world with no pain - no pain whatsoever. At first, we might think: This is a great idea! No more headaches! No more painful throbbing when you miss a nail with the hammer! But think about it: Would we really want to completely lose our sense of pain? Imagine not having any pain when we break a bone in our leg as we keep on walking or running, not feeling a thing. Imagine no discomfort to warn us of a tumor that may be growing somewhere in our bodies. Imagine no pain to signal a swollen appendix. Imagine no discomfort to warn us of blood vessels clogging around the heart. Imagine not feeling any pain when we rest our hand on a hot stove. Many times, pain is a signal. Imagine not being able to feel hunger. Hunger is not pleasant, but can you imagine never feeling hungry? Can you imagine needing to set an alarm on your phone to remind you to eat? Imagine our

clothes catching on fire without being able to feel it. I don't know how many of us realize this, but there is a rare condition where some children are born without the capacity to feel pain. It is referred to as Smith-Magenis Syndrome and describes a genetic abnormality where one of the symptoms is decreased sensitivity to pain. And at first, we might think: That is awesome! My child can pay for the NFL! In reality, though, it is an absolute nightmare. I read some stories this week of parents who need to put ice cubes in their children's soup – just in case, to keep them from scalding themselves. Without pain, little children will chew off their own fingers, they cut themselves with knives without knowing it, and on and on and on. Pain, then, is a warning to take care of something before it gets much worse. Often, pain is the alarm that we are making a wrong choice. And over time, with repeated reminders, we often come to realize that it is better to make right choices than wrong choices. For most of us at least, after we touch that hot stove a few times, we figure out: This is not something that I ever want to do again!

Now, the same thing true physically is often true spiritually. Notice, please, Psalm 119:71, a Psalm of King David. David says to God, ***"It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes."*** David, then, was talking about a time in his life when he suffered for doing what was wrong, and his suffering (his affliction) caused him to come to a deeper understanding of God's law. He suffered and realized, "I do not want to do this again!" His affliction caused him to learn God's statutes. We think of Job, who suffered, and questioned God, and learned something in the process. Suffering, then, has a way of teaching us and training us to avoid future suffering, both physically and spiritually.

IV. There is another benefit to suffering, and that is: There are times when suffering can give us MUCH GREATER OPPORTUNITIES TO SHARE THE LOVE OF GOD.

We have already referred to Joseph, who had the opportunity to speak about God to Pharaoh, king of Egypt. We have already referred to Daniel and his three friends, who all had the opportunity to demonstrate their faith before Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. We think of the first great expansion of the early church in the opening verses of Acts 8. They spread out in all directions, not because of some elaborate plan, but because they were being persecuted. They ran in all directions, they preached the word of God as they fled, and the church grew because of it. We also think of Paul and Silas, imprisoned in the city of Philippi. Without that experience, would they have ever been able to baptize the jailer and his family? There are so many other examples of God's people going through a time of pain or testing, and that pain allowed them to reach out with God's love in ways that might not have been possible otherwise.

In modern times, I think of an article I read in the Gospel Advocate magazine from October 1988, an article about a man by the name of Robert Reid, who was born with Cerebral Palsy. Unable to clothe or even feed himself, he spent a total of 21 years as a missionary to Portugal. The article explained that one of the few physical activities he can do is to stand on his knees (buoyed in the water) and to baptize those who sit in the water beside him in the Atlantic Ocean. During those 21 years in Portugal, he was able to baptize 190 people into Christ, and he uses his disability as an advantage. The article explained that he will often go into a restaurant and ask somebody to feed him, complete strangers will step up to help, and he will use that time to explain the gospel. In the article, he describes getting to meet the president of Portugal. Apparently a law was passed to prohibit the use of rubber stamps for signing checks. Well, he somehow arranged a meeting with the president to explain why this was a problem, and that meeting allowed him to share the gospel with the president of Portugal at that time. I have put an article about this man's life in the cubbyholes this morning. I looked online for some updates. I found his website that hasn't been updated for a number of years, but in the last monthly report that was published there, I discovered that as of May 2011, at least, he was volunteering at John Middleton State Prison in Jones County, Texas, where he goes in and teaches the inmates

about Jesus. At the end of the report, he says, “During the month of May, 55 men gave their life to the Lord in baptism.” I looked at some of the reports leading up to that one, and that was about average – 50 to 60 people baptized every month because of his visits in the prison! If he had been born without that disability, would he have had those opportunities? Suffering has a way of opening doors for the spread of God’s word.

V. There is another benefit to suffering, and that is: Suffering has a way of reminding us to APPRECIATE OUR BLESSINGS.

I think of what Paul said in Philippians 4:12-13, *“I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”* I know some of you have told me just recently how much being sick and away from the services of the church has caused you to really appreciate the fellowship we have here. We think of how illness helps us appreciate being well. Right at this moment I am not coughing, my back doesn’t feel like somebody has jabbed an ice pick into it, I do not have a splitting headache, I feel good right now, and I appreciate how good this feels, because I know what it means to suffer with some of those things. Suffering has a way of reminding us to be thankful. Perhaps you have seen the poem: *Thank God for dirty dishes...*

Truly, God has been good to us, and sometimes our “suffering” allows us to appreciate our blessings with much greater clarity.

VI. There is one more benefit we need to consider this morning, and that is: Suffering reminds us that THIS WORLD IS NOT OUR HOME.

We think of the words of King Solomon in Ecclesiastes 7:2, *“It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living takes it to heart.”* In other words, when we experience sorrow, we remember that the end is near for all of us, and there is great benefit in that, to remember that this life is not all that there is. We need that constant motivation. We remember the words of the apostle Paul from 2 Corinthians 4:16, that *“...momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.”* In other words, there is some benefit to affliction. It keeps us focused on those things that cannot be seen. It keeps us focused on the eternal. It keeps us focused on the *“house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”*

Some of you might remember that right around the time we decided to move to Madison, I got a call from a family who had very slowly drifted away from the church down in Janesville. Their 28-year old son had survived brain cancer several years earlier, and now he just had the feeling it was back, and he had gone in for a brain scan, he was waiting for the results, and his mom and dad wanted the preacher to stop in for a visit. Well, I stopped by, I went back into his dark bedroom. He was about my age at that point, and I really don’t know what to say, so after we talk for a little bit, I ask him whether he’s ever been baptized. And his answer was, “No, because I could never get up the courage to walk down the aisle during a worship service.” And so, of course, I said, “You don’t need to walk down the aisle. If you want to obey the gospel, you can be baptized right now, just me and you if that’s the way you want do to it.” He was thrilled, we drove over to the church building, and he was baptized immediately. This, by the way, is the reason why I try not to emphasize “coming forward,” so to speak. It tends to give the impression that you have to “come to the front” in order to be saved. We offer the invitation after the sermon each week. But in my experience, a vast majority of people will obey the gospel after a one-on-one Bible study. This is the way it should be, and that is the way it happened with this young man. Several days later, though, they met with the doctors, the cancer was back, and within a

few months, I was called upon to preach his funeral. I tell this story to make the point that suffering can sometimes cause us to refocus our priorities. Once he had those symptoms, that young man started to get serious about eternity. As I remember it, through that process, his mom and dad were also restored to the church and to their faith in God. As far as I know, God did not cause that suffering, but as painful as it was, there was some benefit to it. Pain and suffering has a way of keeping this world from being too attractive. Pain reminds us that we are not home yet. Suffering reminds us that there is a time coming when the Lord will wipe every tear from our eyes (Revelation 21:4).

Conclusion:

Hopefully next week we will be able to wrap up this brief series on suffering by looking to God's word for some very practical advice. What should we say or do, what should we not say or not do, if we find ourselves either suffering or in a position to help someone who is?

As we close, though, we do want to offer an invitation to all who are here to obey the gospel. The gospel is the good news that Jesus died for our sins, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. We obey the gospel by having a change of heart concerning sin, that is, we repent of our sins. We then allow ourselves to be briefly buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins. When we come up out of the water, our sins are gone, we have a fresh start, and the Christian life begins. If you have any questions, we hope you will pull one of us aside after the service this morning, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com