

## Seeking to Understand Suffering April 22, 2018

Suffering is complex and can often have many faces! There isn't a one-size-fits-all in the world of suffering. This discussion will help us seek some understanding of the overall topic.

**Romans 8:28** > *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*

### Why does God ordain suffering?

1. In the broad picture, it is because of mankind's fall in Eden. Suffering can in some way be traced back to the results of this event.

**Genesis 1:26a, 27, 31** > *Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.*

**Genesis 2:16-17** > *And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."*

Dr. D.A. Carson states . . . **Ever since the ancient revolt, suffering has been woven, with perplexity and pain, into the fabric of human experience. We all live and move and have our being amid Eden's wreckage. Affliction and evil—universal as they are real—haunt us, stalk us, plague us.**

**Note:** Even though suffering can be traced back to Eden, not all suffering can be traced back to a specific sin in a person's life. This was a mistake that Job's friends made when they met with Job.

**Job 8:1-6** > *Then Bildad the Shuhite answered and said: <sup>2</sup> "How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a great wind? <sup>3</sup> Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right? <sup>4</sup> If your children have sinned against him, he has delivered them into the hand of their transgression. <sup>5</sup> If you will seek God and plead with the Almighty for mercy, <sup>6</sup> if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore your rightful habitation.*

**Job 11:6** > . . . *For he is manifold in understanding. Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves.*

**Note:** Even the disciples made this same assumption about sin and suffering.

**John 9:1-3** > *As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.*

2. It is a means of dealing with sin and helping a person gain freedom from that sin.

**Hebrews 12:6-11** > *<sup>6</sup> For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." <sup>7</sup> It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? <sup>8</sup> If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. <sup>9</sup> Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? <sup>10</sup> For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. <sup>11</sup> For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*

**1 Corinthians 11:29** > *For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.*

3. It is a grace for shaping His children. Suffering is an important and strategic place for God to work in the lives of His children.

**Ecclesiastes 7:4** > *The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.*

**Romans 5:1-5** > *Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*

**1 Peter 1:3-9** > *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

**James 1:2-4** > <sup>2</sup> Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup> for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup> And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

4. It is a vivid reminder that we are living in a fallen world in desperate need of God and the gospel.

**2 Corinthians 1:8-9** > For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

**2 Corinthians 4:6-10** > <sup>6</sup> For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. <sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

**Psalm 147:5, 6, 10, 11** > <sup>5</sup> Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. <sup>6</sup> The LORD lifts up the humble; he casts the wicked to the ground. <sup>7</sup> <sup>10</sup> His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man, <sup>11</sup> but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.

**Psalm 6:1-7** > O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath. <sup>2</sup> Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing; heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled. <sup>3</sup> My soul also is greatly troubled. But you, O LORD-- how long? <sup>4</sup> Turn, O LORD, deliver my life; save me for the sake of your steadfast love. <sup>5</sup> For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise? <sup>6</sup> I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. <sup>7</sup> My eye wastes away because of grief; it grows weak because of all my foes.

**Psalm 61:1-4** > Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer; <sup>2</sup> from the end of the earth I call to you when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I, <sup>3</sup> for you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy. <sup>4</sup> Let me dwell in your tent forever! Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings!

5. It causes us to keep the right perspective.  
What's important!  
What's eternal!  
The incredible privilege of knowing Christ!

**2 Corinthians 4:17-18** > <sup>17</sup> For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, <sup>18</sup> as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

6. To keep our hope fixed on God

**Romans 8:16-24** > <sup>16</sup> The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup> and if children, then heirs-- heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. <sup>18</sup> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup> For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. <sup>23</sup> And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup> For in this hope we were saved.

We are saved in the environment of hope! We often live in hard and difficult circumstances, but we always have hope, this confident expectation of God's sustaining grace and the promise of being glorified with Christ!! It is natural to be given to despair, discouragement, defeat and despondency. The reality of the resurrection is like a neon light that reminds us that there is a sure and steadfast hope in Christ!!

### How do we suffer and glorify God?

Note: It is critical to prepare yourself to suffer with grace.

1. Grow in our knowledge of God

**Colossians 1:9-11** > <sup>9</sup> And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, <sup>10</sup> so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

**2 Peter 3:18** > But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

Note: It is important that we know the God revealed in Scriptures, NOT the God presented in our culture.

- He is Sovereign - He has a purpose, and He will achieve His purpose.

**Romans 11:33-36** > <sup>33</sup> Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! <sup>34</sup> "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" <sup>35</sup> "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" <sup>36</sup> For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

**Psalms 115:1-3** > Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness! <sup>2</sup> Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?" <sup>3</sup> Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.

**Isaiah 46:9-11** > for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, <sup>10</sup> declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,' <sup>11</sup> . . . I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.

**Job 42:1-2** > Then Job answered the LORD and said: <sup>2</sup> "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

**Psalms 139:13-16** > <sup>13</sup> For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. <sup>14</sup> I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. <sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. <sup>16</sup> Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

**Genesis 50:19-20** > <sup>19</sup> But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

- He is Good - God is the final standard of good, and all that God is and does is worthy of approval.

**Luke 18:19** > And Jesus said to him, . . . No one is good except God alone.

**Psalms 100:5** > For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

**Psalms 34:8** > Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!

**Romans 8:28** > And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

- He is Wise - God always directs our lives and fulfills His purposes according to His perfect knowledge.

**Romans 16:27** > *to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.*

**Job 9:4** > *He [God] is wise in heart and mighty in strength-- who has hardened himself against him, and succeeded?--*

**Psalms 104:24** > *O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all;*

- He is Loving, Caring, & Faithful to His people.

**John 17:20-23** > <sup>20</sup> "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup> that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

**1 Peter 5:6-11** > <sup>6</sup> *Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, <sup>7</sup> casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. <sup>8</sup> Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. <sup>9</sup> Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. <sup>10</sup> And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. <sup>11</sup> To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.*

**Isaiah 40:9b - 11** > *"Behold your God!" <sup>10</sup> Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. <sup>11</sup> He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.*

2. Trust the Lord, because we know the Lord

**Psalms 62:1-2, 5-8** > *For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. <sup>2</sup> He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken. . . . <sup>5</sup> For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him. <sup>6</sup> He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. <sup>7</sup> On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God. <sup>8</sup> Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. Selah*

3. Be satisfied in the Lord

**Psalm 73:23-28** > <sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. <sup>24</sup> You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. <sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. <sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. <sup>27</sup> For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. <sup>28</sup> But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.

**Habakkuk 3:17-19** > <sup>17</sup> Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, <sup>18</sup> yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. <sup>19</sup> GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.

4. Think through the sufferings of Christ

**Mark 14:33-36** > <sup>33</sup> And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. <sup>34</sup> And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch." <sup>35</sup> And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. <sup>36</sup> And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

5. Recognize and embrace suffering as a normal part of life as a child of God

Dr. R C Sproul opens up his lectures on suffering with this series of questions: **Should we be surprised by suffering? Could it be that suffering is part of the human condition? A calling ordained by almighty God?**

**Romans 8:16-18** > <sup>16</sup> The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup> and if children, then heirs-- heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. <sup>18</sup> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

**Philippians 3:10** > that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,

**1 Peter 4:13** > But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

**Matthew 10:38** > And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

6. Don't waste your suffering - Don't run from it, but embrace it and let it do what God designed it to do. See Suffering and the Sovereignty of God by John Piper and Justin Taylor (pp. 207-217)

### **How can I help others through suffering?**

1. Some of my greatest challenges:

- To accept that life continues on and people have fun and celebrate while my life is so dark.
- To keep faith when life seems so out of whack.
- To keep the heart from cynical bitterness.
- To function as a believer, spouse, parent, and worker

**Psalm 38: 6, 9, 11, 15** > *I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning. For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart. O Lord, all my longing is before you; my sighing is not hidden from you. My heart throbs; my strength fails me, and the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me. My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my nearest kin stand far off. But for you, O Lord, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer.*

2. Understand that all suffering is unique, you are unique, and your relationship with God is unique. Don't try to force others to grieve as you have grieved. Each person's relationship with the Lord is different, their background and context can be unique.
2. Pray for wisdom to know how and when to speak and share truth. Try to avoid asking dumb questions and saying dumb things!
3. Weep with those who weep [Romans 12:15] -
4. Be familiar with the basic aspects of grief and suffering.
  - Shock
  - Denial
  - Anger
  - Questioning
  - Depression
  - Submission
  - Moving forward

Note: These do not always occur in this order and people process and move through these at different paces. Don't force your timetable on others.

Note how Job dealt with grief and suffering: He began with faith-filled responses, then moved into deep grief and wanting to die, he then had a desperate need to get some answers, and concluded by acknowledging that God is God and he would trust Him!!!

5. Remind them that when you are too broken to do anything else, you can cry/call out to God!
6. Think through the following text:

**2 Corinthians 1:3-11** > <sup>3</sup> *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. <sup>5</sup> For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. <sup>6</sup> If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. <sup>7</sup> Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. <sup>8</sup> For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. <sup>9</sup> Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. <sup>10</sup> He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. <sup>11</sup> You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.*

- Walk with your friends through their suffering.
  - Share comfort, truth, and grace that you have experienced from the hand of God. As you daily walk with the Lord, He will equip you to help others.
  - Set your hope on God to deliver your friends through suffering.
  - Pray for your friends that are suffering.
7. Encourage them to preach truth to themselves, even when they don't want to do so! Be intentional in what you saturate yourself with --God things - songs, Word, sermons, friends, books, etc.
  8. Encourage them to seek external help when necessary.
  9. Provide good resources for them and allow them to work through them at their own speed.

## Ditch Friends

Those people who have kindly, quietly, gently, and with genuine hearts climbed down into the ditch of grief with me.

They came, though it's not a happy or comfortable place to be. It is a true place of sorrow with dark hateful pain and lonely aching.

They came, sometimes carrying Bibles, but often with just listening ears and understanding of who God is.

They didn't try out trite sayings not meant for "ditch talk," nor did they even suggest that I would need to "move on." On the contrary, they defended my right, my need to be in the ditch while God did His work of grace.

Ditch talk is careful talk. It is not a place for "fools who speak all their mind." It is not a place for shaky people who are uncomfortable with periods of silence or for whom groaning and sobbing are too much to bear.

Some ditch friends feel so strongly about the sovereignty of God (as we all should--but brains get scrambled in the ditch) that they have a difficult time with the days of questioning God, but they aren't shocked or dismayed. When those friends climbed down to sit with me in that deep place, they ever so gently guided my rolling, heaving thoughts back to the God of all--the God who is above all, who gave life and can take it when He wills.

Kindred-heart ditch friends are the ones who "get it." Somehow, God allows them to feel my feelings and almost think my thoughts. They even understand how I often wish to just stay in the ditch and let the dirt walls cave in and cover me--and they tell me so. Then, just by their understanding I am helped and aided in the battle to avoid dwelling there indefinitely.

God has sent a few friends into my ditch who don't know Him. (These are occasions when His grace truly amazes me). That's when the Spirit within me--the guarantor of future hope--gives me strength to **stand up**. And I not only stand, I testify of the hope that is in me. **Oh, joyous hope!! Oh, amazing Comforter!! Oh, glorious knowing!!**

So, why the ditch?

It can't be helped. Plain and simple. You would have to be blasted with such pain to know that it cannot be helped.

Ditches are the places for the weak, where God shows that **He** is strong. I feel sorry for the hurting souls who don't allow for ditch time. They might never know how good it feels when the Spirit stands you up. **Grace.**

Those that have been there had better learn more of God.  
They had better be true ditch friends for others in need!

Becky Valentine 11-13-05  
[gigivalentine5@gmail.com](mailto:gigivalentine5@gmail.com)

## **Some Recommended Resources**

A Grief Observed by C S Lewis

A Path Through Suffering by Elizabeth Elliot

Heaven by Randy Alcorn

How Can I Live With My Loss by Tim Jackson - - Free pdf available online

How Long, O Lord? by D A Carson

Let Me Grieve but not Forever by Verdell Davis

Pearls of Great Price by Joni Erickson Tada

Suffering and the Sovereignty of God by John Piper and Justin Taylor

Tear Soup by Pat Schwiebert and Chuck DeKlyen

The Misery of Job and the Mercy of God by John Piper

Tracks of a Fellow Struggler by John Claypool