

# Dying to Live: Suffering for a Higher Purpose

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A few weeks ago, I was in the gym and noticed a guy working with a personal trainer. He was doing an abdominal circuit, and after a few supersets of planks and crunches he started groaning in pain. Now I work out, but my routine is not as intense because I have two simple goals: to not look fat in clothes, and to stay fit enough to surf. So, as I watched this guy, I thought, “Why would anyone submit themselves to this?” Then it occurred to me, he has different goals. Like my friends who do CrossFit, some people push themselves to the limit, enduring discomfort and pain, because they want to get in the best shape possible for their age and body type. If that were my goal, I would probably be doing the same.

Indeed, most of us are willing to make sacrifices and endure pain for a higher purpose. Think about the sacrifices that parents make for their children, that students make for a degree, that professionals make for their careers, that soldiers make for their country, or that missionaries make for the mission of Jesus.

## **Choosing Suffering for a Higher Purpose**

All of us experience suffering that we don't choose, and when this happens we try to stay close to God and do our best to handle it with faith and maturity. In the process, we hope to learn important lessons, grow spiritually, and become better people.

But not all suffering is forced upon us. Sometimes we choose it in service to a higher purpose. This is certainly true as we seek to follow Jesus, who says in Mark 8:34-35:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

Jesus is saying that sometimes we are called to choose suffering, to carry a cross, to experience a kind of death. Furthermore, he teaches that there are at least two higher purposes that empower us to be obedient.

First, suffering can serve as a catalyst for our own spiritual transformation. It can help us become more compassionate, loving, kind, wise, strong, virtuous, and faithful. It can help us become more like Jesus. Part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus is to choose a life of self-sacrificial love.

I've heard countless testimonies of how people felt closer to God when going through suffering than in any other time of their life, and how God used their pain to change them in positive ways. While they didn't necessarily enjoy the pain, they felt called to take-up a cross, and by faithfully carrying it became a better version of themselves. God expanded their capacity for compassion and gratitude, which helped them to live with more purpose, value, meaning, and joy. In short, when we are called to travel the road of suffering and are obedient, we can learn many lessons that make our lives better in the long run.

Second, God can use our suffering to help accomplish God's great rescue mission of this world. The biggest source of inspiration for me in becoming a more faithful follower of Jesus has been other Christians. Not heroes of the faith, but ordinary men and women who handle great adversity and pain with grace, patience, and courage. These living and breathing examples of Christ inspire me to step-up my commitment and be more faithful in my own devotion and service. In this way, God uses our suffering, especially the way we move through it, to help and inspire others, which is one important way that God transforms the world.

In summary, if we are going to take-up our cross and follow Jesus, then we need a clear vision of a higher purpose, something that is compelling and inspiring, something that is bigger than ourselves. According to scripture, that higher purpose is spiritual transformation, which not only makes our own lives more meaningful but also makes us useful in God's great rescue mission of this world.

The best example of this is Jesus himself. To accomplish his mission and serve the greater purposes of God, he was required to choose suffering. The gospels make clear that no one took Jesus' life from him, but he willingly laid it down for the salvation of the world. This was so counterintuitive that Peter, one of his greatest disciples, refused to even consider the idea, pulling Jesus aside and rebuking him in private. Turning to his disciples, he scolded Peter: "Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind on human things not divine things" (Mark 8:31-33). Jesus continued by teaching the disciples that if they wanted a life worth living then they had to be willing to suffer, to take up a cross; that they must crucify their ego and completely surrender to God. And Jesus didn't just teach this, he also lived it to the end, even to the point of death on a (literal) cross.

Following the example of Jesus, many others have witnessed to these truths about sacrifice and suffering. Think of all the biblical characters who illustrate the value of suffering for a higher purpose, people like Abraham, Mary, Peter, and Paul. Think also of the great cloud of witnesses throughout Christian history, culminating in our time with people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King Jr. And think of all the faithful Christians with whom we have the privilege of sharing life even to this day.

As we learn and meditate on these stories and countless others, we get a clear vision of the higher purposes of discipleship, especially during seasons of suffering. They remind us of some essential truths:

- God will not allow our suffering to last forever. It's only for a season.

- Our suffering is not meaningless, nor is it in vain. While God does not cause our suffering, he certainly finds ways to use it for our own transformation and that of the world.
- God suffers with us, so we never face our pain alone.
- God gives us everything we need to move through suffering with grace, maturity, and faithfulness, and when we fail God offers grace and forgiveness.
- Our suffering will eventually give way to joy.

These are the promises of God that together generate a vision of a higher purpose that empowers us to choose the way of self-sacrificial love. Without them our suffering becomes meaningless and death-dealing. Without them we'll never be able to faithfully follow Jesus during seasons of great suffering and learn the lessons therein.

### **The Dialectic of Suffering and Hope**

All of this leads to an important truth: we should never collapse the tension in Christian life between suffering and hope, because that tension is creative and transformative.

It is true that all of us experience suffering, and part of what it means to be a Christian is to learn how to handle our suffering in a Christlike way. Wisdom teaches that we should expect suffering, so we can prepare for it. However, Christianity cannot be reduced to suffering, nor does it seek to glorify suffering in and of itself. It never has the last word in the Kingdom of God. There is never a cross without an empty tomb, never a death without a resurrection. Christianity is about the good news that love wins, life wins, God wins, and when we talk about the necessity of suffering it's always in the context of God's ultimate victory over sin, evil, and death. Therefore, as we anticipate and prepare for seasons of suffering, as we take-up our cross and follow Jesus, it's important to remind ourselves of the higher purposes of God. Suffering without hope leads to an unproductive and death-dealing despair that has no place in the Kingdom of God. Likewise, hope without sacrifice leads to empty wishing, and joy without an honest acknowledgement of suffering leads to a kind of sentimentality that make it hard to take Christianity seriously.

True Christianity acknowledges the truth and importance of both suffering and hope, holding them in productive tension. As we live in this tension, as well as that of law and grace and love and justice, God recreates us in the image of Jesus and gives us the possibility of a truly good life.

### **Challenge**

Remember the words of Jesus: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Where do you find yourself in all of this? Is God calling you to something higher? Is there a sacrifice you need to make or a season of suffering you need to endure to achieve the higher purposes of God? Do you need to get into recovery, spend some time grieving losses in therapy, do some painful emotional work with your spouse or kids, give-up something that is blocking your own spiritual growth, sacrifice more time for deeper spiritual practice, or make a major decision that you've putting off too long?

We are all in different places on the disciples' path, and God calls us to different seasons at different times. Only you know what God is calling you to do. In your own discernment process, remember that God is with you, and that if you stay close to Jesus and move forward with faith then your suffering will not be in vain. God will use it to transform you and others. Remember the promises of God and allow the hope transmitted therein to give you what you need to keep moving forward in ways that are life-giving and productive.