

DCF:

Pain is a topic we're all familiar with. If we've sprained an ankle or broken a rib, we know what pain is. If someone we know dies, we know what pain is. If we've ever broken up with a boyfriend or girlfriend, we know what pain is. If we've lost our job or had to take a paycut, we know what pain is. Is pain a good thing? Most of the time, we'd say "NO!" We don't like pain.

But think about it for a moment. If there was no pain in our lives, we wouldn't be aware of injuries. If we felt no pain at spraining an ankle, we might end up really damaging it by walking or running on it. If we felt no emotional pain, we'd end up making the same mistakes again and again in life. If we never suffered at all in life, how would we know that we needed a Savior? How would we grow in our faith?

“IS SUFFERING DESTRUCTIVE OR CONSTRUCTIVE?” Well, it certainly causes a lot of pain, but it definitely brings great blessings.

Part One: It certainly causes a lot of pain

Suffering is certainly something that Zechariah was familiar with. He was a prophet in Israel after the nation returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. Of course, not all the Jews in Babylon returned. Just a few did. It was to this group of people that God spoke through Zechariah. God was encouraging them to rebuild the temple so that they might worship Him. As part of God's encouragement, He gives them some wonderful prophecies about the future. This chapter points ahead to God's cleansing them from sin.

The portion of Zechariah that we have before us today is a specific prophecy about Christ. The shepherd that the Lord is talking about is our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. **“Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me! declares the Lord Almighty.”** David describes Jesus as “my shepherd” in the 23rd Psalm. That's just one instance. Time and time again the Bible uses the term shepherd to describe Jesus. Jesus uses that term to describe Himself, as well. He also quotes the next verse when He faced arrest in the garden of Gethsemane. Plus, who is closer to the Lord than Jesus, true God and true man? It's very clear to us that this is a prophecy of Jesus Christ.

But, oh boy, it's a prophecy of pain. **“Awake, O sword”** is not a pleasant prophecy. Jesus would experience the sword of suffering at the expressed command of the Lord. This is the sword of judgement, a picture of God exacting vengeance on the sin-bearer, Jesus Christ. It was searingly painful - hell itself. It was the Lord's will that Jesus would suffer the blows of His sword of judgement. It was the Lord's will that Jesus would endure our punishment, our suffering for sin.

Would you willingly lift a weapon against someone you loved and cared for? No. We love and cherish our loved ones. We don't want to hurt our friends or any member of our family. We want to build them up, protect them, cherish them. In this world, we often think of suffering as destructive. Suffering takes away from enjoying life. Suffering is not something we want our loved ones to endure. It causes a lot of pain, and we don't like pain.

Jesus suffered. His followers would suffer as well. That's part of this prophecy, too. **“This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold.”** We had Christ suffer the sword of suffering. Now we have His followers suffering the fire of affliction. The apostles were beaten, imprisoned and killed. They suffered a lot of pain.

We too, because we follow Christ, will suffer the fire of affliction in our lives. We're part of that one third the Lord talks about here. Clearly, Christians are in the minority on this world. We see the spread of Islam. We take note of the Eastern religions like Hinduism, Taoism and Shintoism. We see the rapid rise of atheists here in the United States, paralleling the decline of Christianity in Europe. Even among so-called Christians there is a growing denial that Jesus is the only way to heaven. And when we stand up for Jesus, when we tell others what He says in His Word, we often enter the fire of affliction.

There's the high school girl who believes sincerely in Jesus and wants to show her love for Him. She wants to love her neighbor as herself and praise the Lord's name. And yet when she does among her classmates, they marginalize her. They gossip about her, bullying her on Facebook and trashing her name in the cafeteria. Suffering causes pain.

Or, there's the young man at the paper mill that wants to live his faith. He doesn't go out drinking with the boys. He doesn't cut corners at work or brag about the sinful things he does. He quietly reads his Bible at break. In response, his fellow workers call him a Bible-banger, a religious nut. When he prayed quietly to himself before eating his lunch, one of them called out "Hey, maybe your God will turn your baloney sandwich into a steak" and the group in the lunch room laughed. Suffering certainly causes pain, doesn't it? But is suffering destructive to your faith?

Some might claim it does. When faced with pain, some will think "If God is a loving God, why would He allow this?" And then, they turn away from God because they blame Him for all their troubles. They get it wrong. Suffering is not meant to punish, but to purify. God's purification process is not destructive, but constructive. Kind of like addition by subtraction.

Part Two: It brings great blessings

Just look at the blessings that came from Jesus' suffering. His suffering on the cross constructs a populated heaven. Without His suffering, heaven would be filled only by God and the angels. Now, because Jesus suffered and paid for our sins, heaven will be populated by believers. His suffering purified us in God's eyes and makes us worthy of being with Him in paradise. His suffering brings us great blessings, greater than anything we can ever imagine.

Jesus knew this. That's why He willingly endured this suffering. That's why he willingly took the sword of God's anger. He did this because He loves us and treasures us. He knew it was the only way that we could be purified of all sin. ***"He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."*** (Isaiah 53:5-6) His suffering is truly a blessing for us!

Most of us know what it's like to sacrifice for those we love. Parents sacrifice for their children. They give up time, sleep and money to benefit their children. We do it because we love our kids. We want them to have a good life, a happy life. We expend time and energy to teach them about Jesus and bring them to worship Him here. We talk to them about lifestyle choices, giving advice and warnings. And sometimes we sacrifice our child's affections because we love them. When we impose curfews, consequences and take away car permission, they may get angry with us. But this pain, this "suffering" that we endure brings blessings to our children. It helps them grow up safely. Our suffering brings blessings to our children.

But our suffering also brings blessings to us. Not just suffering for our children, but suffering all the pain this sinful world throws our way. When we suffer - whether emotionally or physically - it burns away sinful self-reliance. We come to understand that we are not in charge of our lives. God is. We come to understand that it is not our strength that will get us through our suffering. God's is. We come to realize that this place, this plot of ground we're standing on is not our home. Heaven is. Suffering drives believers to call on God' name, trusting that He will answer all our prayers in the way that is best for us. The fires of affliction cleanses our ears so that we can hear our Lord say to us so very clearly: ***"They are my people."***

Suffering leads us to see the truth that means everything. ***"The Lord is our God."*** He is the One who gets us through the fires of affliction. He is the One who holds out the gift of paradise before our eyes. He is the One we can trust to make all things work out for His children. He is the One who will make all the suffering, the pain, the frustration of this sinful life end on Judgment Day. Yes, pain isn't fun. It's not enjoyable. But it does bring blessings. May God bless your pain with His presence.

AMEN