

Suffering, Comfort, and Others

2 Corinthians 1:3-11

Outline/Summary

1. Our Suffering Comes from God with Purpose

Alternatives to the mystery of suffering coming from God:

- There is no God
- There is a God, but He is not good
- There is a God, but He is not in control of suffering

What the Bible Teaches--God ordains and has purpose in all things

- Promised to be the case (Rom 8:28)
- Clearly seen in the story of Joseph (Gen 50:20)
- Demonstrated perfectly in the crucifixion of Jesus (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28)

Two things we can draw from all of this so far

- God's purposes are not always immediately seen/understood
- God limits suffering--God's restraining grace keeps things from being much worse

2. Our Suffering Comes with Spiritual Comfort (v. 3-4)

Key points

- God gives comfort to every Christian
- God gives comfort to every affliction
- God gives sufficient comfort for every trial

Qualifications

- Not the same amount/form of comfort for every Christian to every kind of trial
- It won't necessarily *feel* like we are receiving the needed comfort
- Ref. 2 Cor 4:7-11

Rooted in God Himself

- "the Father of mercies and God of all comfort" --demonstrated in our suffering
- Ref. 2 Cor 12:7-10

Pursuing Comfort (from suffering)

- **Wrong ways:** denial, wishful thinking, distraction, complaining/self-pity
- **Right way:** trust in God's faithfulness, pray with confidence in it

3. Our Suffering and Comfort are for Others (v. 3-4)

Good for us (Rom 5:3-5; Jam 1:2-3)

Good for others

- *genuine empathy*
- *suffering assignment--pursue comfort in God & comfort one another*
- *corporate suffering/comforting as the Body of Christ*
- *practical truth--focusing on others reduces own suffering*

4. Similarly, Our Comfort Came from Jesus' Suffering (v. 5)

Suffering and comfort are ours in abundance

- 1 Pet 4:1-2
- 1 Pet 4:12-16 *do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings*
- Phil 1:29 *to you it has been granted...not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake...*
- Acts 14:22

5. Our Suffering and Comfort Might Indicate True Eternal Hope (v. 7)
- *May give or increase assurance of the new birth* (1 Pet 1:6-7)
 - Suffering is part of the Christian life (1 Pet 4; Phil 1; Acts 14)
 - The Christian life is, in no small part, learning to suffer well.

Study Helps & Application

Suffering for others This takes many forms. While we may think of Mother Teresa-like lives of self denial and service, let's take some time to see how *unintentional* suffering can/has benefitted others. In Biblical examples like Paul (2 Cor 11:23-29) and Job we see God's glory in perseverance and faithfulness with untold multitudes blessed through them.

Discussion 1: *Build one another up with stories of perseverance in suffering.*

- ***Share some specific instances where you have seen people's suffering bring glory to God.***
Examples: People witness awe inspiring strength in the face of death/loss and are drawn to God. Brothers and sisters maturing through shared suffering (Rom 5:3-5)... Historical figures like Corrie ten Boom are fair game too.
- ***How has God's comfort to others affected you personally? (If the previous question never got personal, take it there now.)***

Suffering with purpose--one another Note the explicit references to the purposes for which we suffer ("so that..." "for...") with respect to one another.

Discussion 2: *The Christian life of suffering.*

- ***How did the previous discussion help you see purpose in suffering?***

From an eternal/God-centered perspective, were these sufferings *worth it?

****never minimize people's suffering in any way!--the idea here is the exalting of the glory brought to God.***

^{ESV} **Romans 8:18** For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Get specific. (e.g. "Joe suffered for months then died (physically), but God has used it to draw three people so far to Himself and eternal life... worth it?") --*Make sure you continue to stress the importance of empathy and compassion. This is difficult material, especially for those who have suffered greatly.*

- ***Are you learning to suffer well?***
 - *Have you been growing in this?*

- Do you see yourself wrestling through your suffering in a more thoughtful, more prayerful way than you used to?
- **Do you walk more closely with God in times of suffering or in times of prosperity?**
 - Are you as proficient at counting your blessings as you are at counting your sorrows?

Suffering with purpose--God's glory and character Not only are there explicit references to the purposes for our suffering, there are also implied purposes. Note how God is called "*the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.*" This aspect of God's character can only be revealed through our suffering. (*Compassion and comfort are meaningless apart from suffering.*)

Discussion 3: Believers are to expect suffering (1 Pet 4:12) and persecution (2 Tim 3:12), but are also promised a Helper (John 14:16) and promised they will never be left or forsaken (Heb 13:5b)

- **In our identity as the Body of Christ, what do you understand our role to be in bringing God's comfort to one another?** (Gal 6:2; Rom 12:15; Philemon 1:7)

Suffering and God's Sovereignty The problem of suffering, like the problem of evil, is a difficult topic and one that many use to resist the gospel. Hopefully the previous discussions have helped uncover God's purposes in suffering, but there will still be tough questions.

**optional--please use discernment as to whether you and your group are ready for this heavier material*

Discussion 4: Letting God "off the hook." Well-meaning people often resist the teaching of God's sovereignty over suffering because "a God of love would never ..." There are cases of egregious sin and suffering that will make us recoil at the thought of God being sovereign over and having purpose in them.

- **Which is *preferable to believe?**
**Scripture must guide our beliefs and we've presented a case for God's sovereignty in suffering. This is just turning the tables on the common emotional/philosophical objection*
 - **God has purposes in this suffering beyond our comprehension**
 - **God allows it for no purpose what-so-ever (or doesn't care or can't stop it)**
 Often people default to "free will" here. There is little comfort and even less biblical support for God's paramount commitment to man's free will.
- **Are these teachings more difficult to understand or to accept?**

These are difficult teachings. Though these things are clearly taught, we often struggle with why God does things the way He does. When we are tempted to judge God by human (fallen) standards, it is helpful to remember:

- we have but a "soda straw view" of the universe, history, the heart of man, the holiness of God, etc. while God has the complete picture (Isa 55:9)
- God rebuked those who've questioned His ways/revealed character (Job 38; Rom 9:20)
- "The God I believe in would never ..." is often how we introduce the idol we have created in our own minds.

Memory Verse

^{ESV} **Romans 8:18** For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Resources for Further Study

Suffering

- *If God is Good* by Randy Alcorn
- *How Long, O Lord?* by D. A. Carson
- *Trusting God* by Jerry Bridges
- *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* by John Piper and Justin
- Article: *Don't Waste Your Cancer* by John Piper and David Powlison
(http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/TasteAndSee/ByDate/2006/1776_Dont_Waste_Your_Cancer/)
- Video: Follow Pastor Matt Chandler's inspiring battle with cancer. ([youtube.com/user/villageChurchTX](https://www.youtube.com/user/villageChurchTX))

Next Week's Text:

Colossians 3:16 and various psalms on praise