

Suffering Well

25 March 2015



The word 'suffering' in the Bible refers to the various kinds of hardship that we face on the earth, which we won't experience in heaven (Revelation 21:4). Jesus said that in this world we would have trouble (John 16:33) and all the trouble is ultimately the cause of man's sin and Satan's activity (Genesis 3:14-19, 1 John 5:19, Job 1:12).

I want to argue in this post that God actively uses suffering and it is part of His design in our lives to shape us. We have to come to terms with Scripture's teaching that a good God would use and allow bad things to shape us.

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Suffering in All Kinds of Trials

There are popular teachings in the Christian world which teach that suffering is not part of God's plan for our lives. Some say that suffering should ideally not even be part of our Christian experience, since heaven has no suffering and we are called to experience heaven on earth.

They teach that when the New Testament mentions suffering, it is always in context with persecution, which is the particular kind of suffering in which we are called to rejoice (Matthew 5:10-12). Granted, many times in the New Testament, persecution is the context when the author talks about suffering. But we also see Scriptures such as 1 Peter 1:6, which says that we have had to '*suffer griefs in all kinds of trials*'. This could include any hardship we face, such as illness, disaster and difficult work environments (see also James 1:2).

One of the unique ways that God's people experience suffering and pain is through discipline that our Father Himself measures out (see Hebrews 12:3-11). The manner in which God disciplines is not spelled out here, but it does '*seem painful rather than pleasant*' (v.11), and a sweep of Scripture shows that God's discipline includes war, rebuke, illness, personal "thorns", persecution, loss of status etc.

As difficult as suffering is, in the process, we learn things about ourselves and God that

we would never have learned if life had been easy.

Is God Behind Suffering?

Many object to this, saying that if God is behind suffering, then it is as if He is guilty of child abuse. What father would willingly want to inflict pain on their child? But this view is too simplistic. It misunderstands the nature of our Father and minimizes Scriptures that state God uses suffering. For example, we see in the book of Revelation that Jesus Himself causes a divisive individual within the church to be '*cast on a bed of suffering*' (Revelation 2:22), which refers to serious illness (see 1 Corinthians 11:32).

Or the example of Paul's thorn in the flesh, which was simultaneously a messenger of satan yet permitted by the Lord to keep him humble (2 Corinthians 12).

We have to believe that ultimately all that happens to us is Father-filtered.

Can Anything Good Come from It?

Scripture speaks about the 'blessings' of suffering. The Psalmist says, '*It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.*' (Psalm 119:71). As difficult as suffering is, in the process, we learn things about ourselves and God that we would never have learned if life had been easy.

We must be able to handle the seeming paradox in Scripture that a kind and good God actively allows evil and suffering for our good. We have to believe that ultimately all that happens to us is Father-filtered. This doesn't mean we become fatalistic or have an attitude of resignation in suffering. There are ways God wants us to respond to various trials, but more on that in another post.

We never want to simply limit God to our domesticated view of a being who is only ever 'nice' towards us. He is always good and just and He loves to heal, but behind tragic events that happen does stand the Lord, whom we are called to trust, in faith.