

Suffering Well

Understanding God When I Need Him The Most

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Let's Get Acquainted

If you don't know me personally, let's get acquainted! I am not a professionally trained counselor—I know my limitations. I also know there are good books, blogs and sermons on suffering in addition to recovery groups. I am a fellow-sufferer, but what qualifies me to say anything fresh about suffering? Here's my story for what it's worth.

My Story

My first experience of a severe suffering came early in my life at the age of ten when my mother lost her three-year battle with cancer in 1955. In her last painful months at home I witnessed, without details here, things a ten-year old boy should not have heard or seen. One August morning Dad gathered us in the living room to tell us that Mom went home to be with Jesus during the night. Along with my father and two older brothers, we were devastated. Her free-spirited nature and warm Christian faith left a huge vacuum in our hearts that only God could fill. I especially felt deeply the pangs of loneliness and abandonment when at the end of every school day I was the first to enter our empty house.

Not long after, my father married again. Isabel was a single lady who didn't know how to cook. But she dearly loved my father--she must have, to take on the burden of mothering and cooking for three hungry teenage boys! She was a true saint! But sadly, three months before my wife and I were married in 1965, Isabel also lost her painful battle with cancer and we all grieved again. Fortunately for my brothers and me, our Dad and Mom and Step-Mom suffered well. Their faith and hope in God their Savior remained strong for us and others to observe.

Since then, for many years, I have been fulfilling God's call to pastoral ministry in His church. The Apostle Paul describes it as a "Noble Task" (I Timothy 3:2) meaning, "one who looks upon with care and humbly bears heavy responsibilities". God's calling includes walking with suffering people. I have stood by deathbeds and gravesides. I have sat beside victims of abuse and betrayal. I have wept with spouses of broken marriages and children who felt abandoned. I have prayed with repentant sinners suffering with guilt and regret. I have grieved with those who have lost their job or business. I empathized with suffering people, sharing out of my own experience and my Biblical understandings of God.

However, in the late spring of 2013, I saw blood in my urine and suspected the worst. During the weeks before and many months following bladder cancer surgery, I entered my own "dark night of the soul" or "the valley of the shadow" as I called it. It was now my turn to renew my own understandings of God when I needed him the most. What I had shared with others I now needed to embrace for myself. Along with the memories of painful deaths in my family, as well as the memories of many others I stood by, I needed to trust God in the midst of my own depression and fear. I was not afraid to die—it was the how-of-it that disturbed me the most!

As I met with God daily and throughout each day in prayer and meditation on the very words he spoke about himself, I slowly entered a depth of intimacy with God I didn't know existed. I had heard such testimonies from others but was never sure it could happen for me, but it did! I entered a place in my innermost being of rest and peace and even joy at times. I experienced

deep in my soul an unexplainable presence of God’s Spirit--nothing audible or visible, but a real sense that I was not alone. This went on for months. No family member or friend could touch me that deeply. It was so real that one day I blurted out to my daughter, Amy, “I now have more to die for than to live for”. I couldn’t believe I said it, but it was true. I arrived at a place that it didn’t matter to me anymore whether I lived or died. I discovered what others before me described. Suffering well begins with understanding well and experiencing well the loving nature and ways of God himself. David, the shepherd, understood God well in these familiar words, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you [God] are with me. Your rod and your staff they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4). God was “with” David. And like the shepherd’s rod and staff that administer care and protection to the sheep, David experienced Divine comfort in his “valley of the shadow”. So did I and so can you!

Suffering Well

A Brief Orientation

Perhaps you have come to these Bible lessons alone or in a group setting. Perhaps you have some religious background or none at all. Perhaps you are presently suffering either mildly or severely. Perhaps you’re not suffering right now, but someone you care about is and you’re not sure how to comfort them. But one thing is quite certain—you have suffered and you will suffer again. Welcome!

Through these lessons you hopefully will come to a deeper and clearer understanding of the God of Christianity. The lessons are not an intellectual defense of the faith but rather a practical theology meaning a personal, real-time response to God our heavenly Father who revealed and reveals his loving and caring nature to his creation through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let’s begin with a list of typical questions or statements you may have said or heard others say in a time of great disappointment and suffering. Check all the ones you have said, thought or heard others say or ask:

- Why me?
- I’m such a good person.
- I don’t deserve this.
- Your sins will find you out.
- It was God’s plan for you.
- Why do innocent people suffer?
- Why do evil people have it so good?
- If God is so loving, why doesn’t he remove suffering?
- If God is so powerful, why doesn’t he put an end to evil?
- If I love God, why doesn’t he protect me?

If you came close to checking all of the statements or only a few, you are in the good company of all mankind, religious or otherwise. It should amuse us all that even those who

claim no religious faith suddenly become religious in suffering! Suffering begets anger and anger requires expression and an object. The God of Christianity is pleased to be acknowledged and even falsely accused, but only if in your suffering you come to a deeper understanding and experience of his love and care.

Why Study Suffering?

Why study suffering in the scriptures? Seems a bit depressing! Good question—here are several reasons why. First, in a time of suffering emotions kick into high gear over the pain of loss that is felt so deeply. In your loss of peace or love or hope or control or health or possessions or people, what you know and believe can become vague and unclear. Suffering obscures reality, especially the reality of God himself when you really need him the most. A deep and clear understanding of God will prepare you to suffer or comfort others.

A second reason for understanding God in suffering is that godless humanism fails to deliver comfort. I had an unusual experience of listening to an extended conversation between two friends while sitting in the darkness around a campfire. I was a stranger to them so they chatted as if I wasn't there. One was a twenty-year old young man whose mother was dying of cancer and the other was an older woman, a friend of his mother. Her godless words of comfort were shallow and without hope for this troubled son. She repeated trite platitudes over and over again—"Live one day at a time", "The doctors know best"—"I'm here for you if you need me." She could not fix his broken heart or relieve his fears. It was a common but sad conversation. Mere humanism gives little comfort in the valley of despair. On the other hand, I have also heard well-meaning Christ-followers attempt to comfort each other with trite "Christian" platitudes. We all want each other to be happy again as soon as possible, so we offer shortcuts on the journey of suffering. Remember, the severity of the suffering determines the length of the journey.

A third reason is found in the words of the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians, "...in your anger do not sin...don't give the devil a foothold in your life..." (4:26-27). Keep in mind that the devil or Satan doesn't always plot to make us irreligious, but always attempts to corrupt our understanding of God's nature and marginalize the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ in our life. For example, my grandfather was extremely withdrawn and unhappy most of the time. He showed no interest in anything spiritual. I learned that in addition to my mother's death, he had long before buried two other daughters in their teen years. My grandmother, on the other hand, remained faithful in her love and devotion to Christ. For most of their marriage they slept in different rooms like strangers to one another. Quite a contrast. The difference? One chose in her journey of suffering to walk toward God and the other chose to walk away. As far as we know he never returned. Hopefully these lessons will help you and others to stay on the path toward God himself.

A fourth reason is that suffering is like a refiner's fire which brings to the surface and exposes our moral impurities and character flaws. In suffering we discover the true depth of our faith and our understanding of God himself. Remember the parable of the soils and seeds Jesus taught? He explained to his disciples that the seed is God's Word and the soils are the hearts of people

(Luke 8:11-15). The second seed did not endure and “fell away in the time of testing” because “it had no root” (verse 13). The third seed was “choked by life’s worries” and “did not mature” (verse 14). Some of these people today who thought they were followers of Jesus fail in the refiner’s fire. When I hear them say in their suffering, “Why did God do this to me?” I cringe. When they can’t get past blaming God, who is never blame-worthy, their faith gets stuck and begins to shrink. Perhaps you know someone who did not suffer well. Only the fourth seed of God’s Word endures because “the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop” (Luke 8:15). Those with a noble heart have faith which prevails and their trust in God grows even stronger in suffering. So don’t wait till suffering begins before you understand God’s loving nature and ways or your journey of suffering will take much longer.

The Role of the Comforter

A final reason for this lesson series is that by understanding God we understand the role of a comforter. Suffering is among the most common experiences we share as children of God. As a family of sufferers and comforters the Apostle Paul was inspired to exhort us to “...weep with those who weep...” (Romans 12:15). In other words, when someone suffers don’t shy away—come together! When someone enters the dark night of the soul in “the valley of the shadow” (Psalm 23) they will feel deeply alone. So the role of the comforter is to be present, listen, pray and gently urge the sufferer to pursue God himself. The role of the comforter is limited. No matter how good or right or true your empathic words might be, you cannot touch the depth of the soul that only God himself can touch. If a comforter could, God would not be needed—suffering could be endured or relieved without him. So these lessons are not a training manual for comforters. Neither are they a self-help guide to recovery for sufferers, nor an index of the causes of suffering while many are referred to. Rather, these lessons are an exploration of scripture to arrive at a clear understanding of God our Father when his family needs him the most. To put it yet another way—to understand God well you will comfort well and also suffer well.

How Will You Know You Suffer Well?

Never thought of “suffering well”-- right? We don’t associate “well” with suffering and suffering is never compelling. Suffering well has nothing to do with self-denial (asceticism) or pleasure (masochism). Followers of Jesus Christ are typically human—we avoid suffering and desire to end it ASAP! But in a fallen world suffering is unavoidable. The curse of sin and suffering runs rampant through our lives. Sufferings provoke many emotional responses from loneliness to fear to hopelessness, to shame and sadness to name a few. How you respond to God in the midst of these powerful emotions determines how well, or not so well, you suffer. What you understand about God’s nature and ways will prepare you for suffering when you need him the most. Simply put, God himself is your strength to overcome every natural and unhealthy emotion suffering provokes in you. These understandings of God will start and keep you on the path toward him on the journey of suffering. Understanding God well releases you from self-

absorption and self-pity. You know you are suffering well when you can truly pray, “Lord, whether my pain ends in this life or the next, I surrender to your grace. Release your power perfectly in my weakness for your glory alone.”

God’s Nature and Ours

At first glance the lesson titles and subtitles of God’s nature and our emotional responses to suffering may seem simplistic. But this “slicing and dicing” is meant to uncover and understand the complexity of both God’s nature and ours in suffering. For God, all of the complexities of his nature are fully operating simultaneously. For us, our emotional responses to suffering can swing and mix haphazardly or uncontrollably. Hopefully the lessons will help you to see “the parts of the whole” and understand the magnificence of God and the wonder of his image in us.

A Note to Pastors

How great would it be to lead a congregation of Christ-followers who understood God well enough to comfort each other effectively in times of suffering? It would also be great to be surrounded by brothers and sisters who comfort you and your family in your own suffering. So as a pastor-teacher these lessons might be helpful in the following ways:

1. To deepen the understanding of pastoral staff members, elders, deacons and small group leaders for their ministries to those who suffer.
2. To teach all followers of Christ to suffer well and comfort well.
3. A resource for your preaching ministry.
4. A resource for those anticipating career ministry both inside and outside the church.

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Lesson 1

God's Will

When I Feel Angry

If you skipped “A Brief Orientation”, go back and read it. It will give you a framework to the focus of these Suffering Well lessons—what they are and are not. Who? What? and Why? are answered briefly and clearly.

Anger is a common emotional response to many sufferings. Suffering provokes anger in several directions. First, anger can be directed toward yourself. Coulda, shoulda, woulda leads to self-loathing and self-blame for unwise or evil decisions and actions. When these sufferings result in the suffering of others, self-loathing intensifies.

Second, anger is directed toward others who are blame-worthy for our loss and suffering. Their recklessness seems unforgivable and revenge seems reasonable. The pain of suffering and vengeance is a double threat to the health of your soul. We'll look at revenge in lesson 10.

The third direction of anger is toward God himself. God might be included in the directions above or made the exclusive blame for our suffering. We reason, “If God is who he says he is, he could have prevented my suffering”.

God's will in the matter of human suffering is both a deep and wide subject. So let's go back to the beginning of creation to help us understand God's will when we feel angry toward him in our suffering. Notice three dimensions of God's will that converge in Genesis 1-3.

S.O.A.P. 1 – God's Infinite Power

The first dimension of God's will is that by his determinative will God expresses his infinite power to accomplish anything he chooses to do. His actions cannot be thwarted or overcome. We see this in creation since out of nothing God created all things simply by the power of his words. This is captured by the repeated statement “God said”!

S.cripture – Read Genesis 1:1-27; Romans 1:18-23

O.bservations

1. Did the earth and universe and everything in them begin by an accident or a creation?

Choose a number that best measures your present thinking and why:

Accident 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Creation

Why?

2. What words would you use to describe God's "*power*" and "*divine nature*" in creation that Paul states in Romans 1:18-23?

"power" –

"divine nature" –

A.plications

1. Describe how important it is for you to see God's power and divine nature in creation?
2. Compared to other life-forms in creation, how would you describe your physical and mental nature?

P.rayer – Take a minute to just worship and praise God for his determinative will that displays his power and nature in creation.

S.O.A.P. 2 – God's Infinite Holiness

The second dimension of God's will is that out of his infinite holiness or moral purity he expresses his declarative will. In other words God possesses within himself absolute truth that is undeniable. Absolute truth cannot be improved, modified or compromised. Within himself God declares what is good or evil, true or false. From God's infinite holiness, truth is timeless and changeless.

S.cripture – Read Genesis 2:4-9; I Peter 1:13-16

O.bservations

1. Imagine if God was not morally pure (unholy), and absent of absolute truth within himself. In your opinion, what would his creation look like?
2. Why is God's declared absolute truth of good and evil so important to his creation?

A.plications

1. What are some dreadful things that happened to you before you knew and understood God's declared will regarding the truth of good and evil?

2. Relative truth (always changing) is the opposite of absolute truth (always changeless). Circle the number that represents your present value of truth and why.

Relative 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Absolute

Why?

P.rayer – Praise God for his holiness or moral purity and tell him why it is so important to you.

S.O.A.P. 3 – God's Infinite Love

The third dimension of God's will followed quickly on the second. By God's decretive will he lovingly spoke his moral declarations to Adam and Eve. By creating them in his likeness, God desired that Adam and Eve should freely choose to love and obey him just as God freely chose to set his love on them. Only by giving Adam and Eve the capacity to choose could God and man enter and enjoy a genuine reciprocal relationship of love.

S.cripture – Read Genesis 2:10-17: Genesis 3:1-19

O.bservations

1. Without the capacity or ability or freedom to choose, describe what man's nature would look like.

2. Who did Adam and Eve blame for their wrong moral choice and the suffering that followed?

Who did they not blame?

A.plications

1. Describe how important it is to you to freely love God and others by choice?

2. How does your obedience to God's decretive will express your love of God and others?

P.rayer – Knowing God is not to blame for your suffering, thank him for his infinite love for you.

Understanding God's Will When I Feel Angry *The Risk, the Rescue and the Reward*

Of the entire creation nothing surpasses the greatness of God's creative power and wisdom than the creation of mankind. God determined, "*Let us make man in our image*" (Genesis 1:26). From our perspective we might say, "This was a great **risk**". Why? Because the image of God carries with it the capacity to choose personal relationships--to freely love. To truly test Adam and Eve, God gave them a real moral choice to love and obey him or choose to reject him.

So what went wrong? Adam and Eve not only failed personally, but their moral failure resulted in the curse of sin that would be passed on from generation to generation to the present. This curse of sin also impacts all the created order (Romans 8:18-25). You, along with all of humanity, participate in the curse of sin: "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*"-- the glory of God's image (Romans 3:23).

So who is the blame-worthy cause of our sin and the many sufferings that result? You could answer Adam and Eve. But the fact remains all of us are compliant and willing accomplices. We often hear asked, "Why do the innocent suffer?" In reality there are no "innocents", so the question is moot. Sounds cruel but we are all "by nature objects of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3).

Does the record of creation in Genesis 1-3 have any good news? Yes! God had a plan to **rescue** mankind from the curse of sin--a way by which mankind can be restored and redeemed and reconciled to God. Tucked in the Genesis record is a profound prophetic statement of rescue. God said to the serpent [Satan], "*And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel*" (Genesis 3:15). One of the "us" in Genesis 1:26 will come to earth to accomplish the rescue. We will examine this more closely in Lesson 3.

Suffering and Comforting Well

In suffering if your anger needs an object be assured it cannot be God. While God created and allowed Adam and Eve with the ability to choose freely, God was not the blame-worthy cause of their moral failure and the curse of sin that introduced the pain of every suffering. On the other hand God did not abandon his creation but out of his great love he planned a rescue for which he will be eternally worshipped by all who choose freely to love and obey him now. In your suffering when you pursue God with all your heart, your emotion of anger will subside as you experience his loving comfort. God by his Spirit also places eternity in your heart that gives you a certain hope of heaven. God rescues and **rewards** us with an eternal relationship with him.

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Lesson 2

God's Sovereignty

When I Feel Afraid

Created in God's likeness makes us aware of the present, remember our past and imagine the future. The future is extremely important to us, so we are day-time dreamers and planners of our future whether tomorrow or years from now. We imagine good and pleasurable outcomes. Most of us are eternal optimists.

However, suffering instantly steals our future. When control of our future is lost, fear sets in to consume us emotionally. Our fears may include our parents, siblings or children and grandchildren. A severe suffering may leave us feeling "life will never be the same again" or worse yet, "I have no future at all". The future can feel like a free-fall in a black hole.

God's Sovereign Rule

Throughout the scriptures we find the Lord Jesus Christ as well as God's ministering angels exhorting men and women to "Fear not!" which seems impossible. Do they know something we desperately need to understand about God? What is it? It is the enormous reality that God is sovereign. The word "Lord" actually means authority and rule. God's sovereign rule and authority is absolute. While we lose control in our suffering, God's control is absolute and unhindered. The following is a practical, first-person description of God's sovereignty:

"God rules over all his creation, including me, by his immeasurable power, knowledge, wisdom and freedom--freedom to fulfill his ever-good purposes and promises when, where and how he chooses, governed by his holiness and infinite love for me." *R. A. Borg*

How will understanding God's sovereignty relieve your fears? Before you continue, stop and read the life of Joseph in Genesis, chapters 37-46. You will be glad you did--it's an amazing account of God's sovereign rule.

S.O.A.P. 1 – A Charmed Life Turns Ugly

Joseph was living a charmed life as the favorite son of his father, Jacob. One day unexpectedly, Joseph's life turned ugly when he enters a severe suffering that would last for many years. He experienced betrayal, total loss of control, false accusations, imprisonment and an uncertain future. But he held on to a single lifeline that gave some sense to it all. That lifeline is captured in a simple four-letter word repeated three times in Genesis 39. God wants that word in the story of your life. Find it in Genesis 39:1-15.

S.cripture – Read Genesis 39:1-15; Genesis 45:1-15

O.bservations

1. Did you find it? “The Lord was _____ Joseph.” How would this word explain Joseph’s security and calm his fears?
2. What statement in Genesis 45 did Joseph make to his brothers to summarize what really happened to him?

A.plications

1. “The Lord is with _____” (fill in your name). How would that truth make you feel on your journey of suffering? Explain here:
2. How does God’s sovereign rule in the life of Joseph change your understanding of God and deepen your faith and trust in him?

P.rayer – Thank God that he is “with you”. Tell him you desire to remain faithful in your deepest losses because of his sovereign rule over you.

S.O.A.P. 2 – The Third Theme

The prophets of Israel were God’s messengers. The prophetic theme of these messages was twofold. First, God describes Israel’s present spiritual condition or relationship to him. And second, God declares their collective future. But there was always a third theme running through both prophetic themes and that was God’s self-revelation of his nature. In other words, God describes himself to them. He reminds Israel often of his sovereignty--his authority and rule over them. Look at one example that will calm your fear and give you a future.

S.cripture – Read Isaiah 55:8-16; Acts 17:22-34

O.bservations

1. List at least three qualities of God’s sovereign rule according to Isaiah 55.
 - (1)
 - (2)
 - (3)

2. As you read Paul’s sermon in Athens (Acts 17), what impressed you about God’s sovereignty? Jot down a few impressions here:

A.plications

1. To what degree right now would these two inspired scriptures about God’s sovereignty help you feel secure and calm your fear and why?

Still Fearful 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Secure

Why?

2. Is God small or great to you? How would you describe God’s size to others? Give it a try here:

P.rayer – Ask God to forgive you for thinking he is too small. Tell him you desire to experience the security of his sovereign rule in your time of fear and uncertainty.

S.O.A.P. 3 – Two Amazing Statements

In his first recorded teaching Jesus addresses our fears and worries: “...*your heavenly Father knows what you need...and gives good gifts to those who ask him*” (Matthew 6 & 7). As the child of God you are the object of his sovereignty—his goodness, good purposes and good promises that can loosen the grip of fear on your heart. Notice just two of many amazing statements by the Apostle Paul who was no stranger to severe suffering and fear (II Corinthians 6:1-10).

S.cripture – Read Romans 8:28-29; Ephesians 3:20

O.bservations

1. According to Romans 8:28-29, what is one “good” purpose God has in mind even in suffering?

2. With Paul’s history of suffering in mind, summarize God’s sovereign rule in your own words according to the verses in Romans 8 and Ephesians 3.

A.plications

1. Have you ever experienced something “immeasurable” or “unimaginable” that only God could do that reassured you and calmed your fears? Briefly tell your story here:

2. How open are you to let God define what is “good” in your life and why? Circle one number:
Very Closed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Open
Why?

P.rayer – Thank God for his sovereign rule over you. Tell him you accept his “good work” in you in the time of suffering.

Understanding God’s Sovereignty When I Feel Afraid *Fearful and Anxious Control-Freaks*

The curse of sin is living life in a broken world in which very little is reliable for very long. Somethings are broken from the start and everything else eventually wears out. Happy thought—right? But true! The curse makes all of us fearful and anxious control-freaks working hard to secure our future and the present as well.

Even as children of God we tell him in prayer what he should do to take good or better care of us. But in his wisdom and patience God the Father works his better good by his sovereign rule (Romans 8:28-29). One of the greatest actions of God’s sovereign rule was his preparation of the world for the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Paul put it simply, “*In the fullness of time God sent his Son, born of a woman...*” (Galatians 4:4). A temple priest by the name of Simeon recognized the Christ-child and prayed, “*Sovereign Lord, as you have promised...my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all people, light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel*” (Luke 2:29-32).

Suffering and Comforting Well

Breaking the power of fear in your suffering is only possible by faith and trust in God’s sovereign rule over your life. As a child of God nothing in your life is outside of his rule. The Father delights in turning everything broken in your life on its head, to glorify himself and amaze you. Remember and rest in God’s self-disclosure through Isaiah, that his thoughts and ways are higher, greater and superior to yours (Isaiah 55:8-9). Furthermore, Paul asserts that God does what is “*immeasurable*” and beyond your “*imagination*” by his “*power working in you*” (Ephesians 3:20).

When you humbly surrender to his sovereign reign, God will let you see enough to calm your fears. To suffering Jews in exile Peter wrote: *“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you”* (I Peter 5:6-7). Because of God’s sovereignty, his faithfulness toward you is trustworthy. He never fails or disappoints. He is the perfect Father your soul longs for throughout your earthly journey, especially in your times of fear.

Fully embrace the truth of the first-person description of God’s sovereignty mentioned in the introduction. Here it is again:

“Today I live my life under God’s sovereign reign. He rules over all his creation, including me, by his immeasurable power, knowledge, wisdom and freedom--freedom to fulfill his ever-good purposes and promises when, where and how he chooses, governed by his holiness and infinite love for me.”

R. A. Borg

Cut this out and tape it to the mirror you look into each morning!

Lesson 3

God's Grief

When No One Understands Me

While each one of us is uniquely created, we are made more complex by our parents, siblings and life experiences. Therefore, we respond to our suffering in unique and complex ways. Two people experiencing a mutual loss will grieve quite differently and at different rates of recovery. One might recover quickly while the other never recovers.

Regardless of our differences the scriptures exhort us to “*carry each other's burdens*” (Galatians 6:2) and “*mourn with those who mourn*” (Romans 12:15). While Christian books and blogs and recovery groups are helpful to the sufferer, comforters at best can only empathize, meaning “aware and sensitive” because of a similar suffering. But a comforter cannot feel the sufferer's pain. This is why that in your suffering you feel like no one understands you.

God's Grief

It's a mistake to think or believe that God is so other-worldly that he's unfeeling and untouched by your suffering. It's also a mistake to think that at best God can only empathize with you. But if you correctly understand God's grief, you will be convinced that he completely understands you in your deepest grief. Does God feel your pain? Good question—let's find the answer.

S.O.A.P. 1 – A Perfectly Good Grief

Mankind was created in the likeness of God (Genesis 1:26) with a great diversity of emotions. By these emotions you relate personally to others and deeply grieve in the experiences of suffering. It stands to reason that God himself also has the capacity to grieve as you will discover in the scriptures. The difference is that God's grief is not a weakness but a strength. God is not a stone-cold, emotionless being, nor does his grief leave him weak, distressed, hopeless or broken. He never experiences self-pity. He is not unaware or unmoved by your suffering but comes to you in power. God's grief is perfectly good by which he moves beyond mere empathy to rescue us.

S.cripture – Read Genesis 6:5-8; Psalm 116:1-19

O.bservations

1. God's mercy and patience with a fallen sinful humanity grieved him greatly till what?
2. Write down several statements in Psalm 116 that indicate to you that God is emotionally moved with grief.

A.plications

1. Describe how these scriptures help you to understand God's grief with you and over you?
2. Why is it important to you to have a heavenly Father who grieves over your disobedience and your suffering?

Disobedience:

Suffering:

P.rayer – Thank the Father that his grief is a strength and that he comes to you in power.

S.O.A.P. 2 – Why Christ?

“God is not in the business of fixing everything that is broken in us, but in our brokenness he comes to us to show us Christ.” This quote is from Dr. Leonard Sweet. It begs the question: Why Christ? Remember the prophecy in Genesis 3 regarding God's vengeance on the serpent? “...*he [Christ] will crush your head...*” (Genesis 3:15). Those words were fulfilled in a most unusual way when God the Father sent Christ the Son (John 3:16) to crush the serpent's (Satan) head through his own suffering and death, not for his own sin but for the sin of mankind and then rose victoriously from the dead. All who believe this and are spiritually born again (John 1-3) live this life and eternal life in Christ's victory!

S.cripture – Read Isaiah 53:1-12; Hebrews 4:14-16

O.bservations

1. List as many words as you can find in Isaiah's prophecy that describe the sufferings and grief Jesus Christ endured for a sinful humanity.
2. In your own words describe how and why Christ's priestly ministry (Hebrews 4) is superior to every earthly bishop, priest or minister.

A.plications

1. Add to Christ's sufferings and griefs the fact that he did it all for you. Is there any grief in your life he cannot understand and feel? Circle one:
Possibly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 None Whatsoever!

2. To what degree do you feel comforted knowing that God in Christ completely identifies with you in your most severe suffering? Circle one:
Somewhat 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Ultimate Comfort!

P.rayer – Take a moment to praise the Lord Jesus Christ for suffering in your place on the cross and his resurrection from the dead—an amazing rescue and reward!

S.O.A.P. 3 – Jesus Feels Your Grief and Pain

If you have experienced a spiritual rebirth through faith in Jesus Christ, then he is alive in you by his Spirit. This deep and personal connection makes Jesus the only one in your life who can genuinely say to you, “I feel your pain and I am here to comfort you. In life or death I will never leave you.” This is your incredible reality. Your journey of suffering is never a lonely walk of self-pity. You cannot say, “No one understands what I’m going through.” The fact remains Jesus understands perfectly. No one can comfort you like Jesus the Christ!

S.cripture – Read John 15:1-8; Hebrews 4:16

O.bservations

1. Like a branch in a vine, Jesus insists that his followers can remain in him and he will remain in them. How does this qualify him to feel your grief and pain?

2. How would the statement in Hebrews 4:16 and John 15:7 prepare his disciples for their future sufferings?

A.pPLICATIONS

1. How does the promised access to Jesus Christ in prayer strengthen your confidence in suffering?

2. On a scale of 1 to 10, are you “remaining” in Christ “the vine” right now?
Somewhat 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 All the Way

P.rayer – Thank Jesus for his presence within you by the Holy Spirit of God.

Understanding God's Grief When No One Understands Me *A God Like No Other*

The God of Christianity is unlike all the gods of man's imagination in every way. The psalmist perfectly describes the gods of this world:

*They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see.
They have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell.
They have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk,
nor can they utter a sound with their throats.
Those who make them will be like them,
and so will all who trust in them. Psalm 115:5-8*

In other words, they are lifeless and therefore utterly impersonal. At "best" the gods of man's making are mere reflections of man's sinful nature.

But the God of Christianity is not the product of man's thoughts. Rather, God is only known by his self-revelation. He had to disclose himself to be known by man. Man could never have imagined, conceived or dreamed of such a God. C. S. Lewis put it this way:

"...One of the reasons I believe in Christianity... [is that] it is a religion
you could not have guessed. If it offered us just the kind of universe
we had always expected, I should feel we were making it up. But, in
fact, it is not the sort of thing anyone would have made up."

Moses captures this thought in his message to the Israelites: "*The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law*" (Deuteronomy 29:29).

While man is unable to comprehend the magnitude of God's nature, what is comprehensible is more than enough for faith and devotion. Why? God is extremely personal. So much so that God understands you perfectly in your suffering and grief when no one else can.

Suffering and Comforting Well

Understand God's grief as a strength because he alone is able to go beyond mere empathy for you and enter your suffering with you. No matter the cause of suffering or the complexity of your emotions and personality, God perfectly identifies with you since he is "*at home in you*" (John 14:23) by his Spirit who grieves (Ephesians 4:20). Who would have imagined such a God? You can cry out to the One who is forever "with" you! He perfectly understands you in your grief. When your comforters leave, the One who actually feels your pain and grief remains. What an amazing God!

Lesson 4

God's Presence

When I Feel Alone

In suffering we are driven emotionally inward to a place of loneliness. Even in a crowd of friends or loved ones you can feel lonely on the inside. The greater the suffering, the greater the feelings of isolation. In a severe suffering you may feel like “the elephant in the room” who no one understands and politely ignores. Or worse yet, uncomfortable comforters, in strange ways or words, gasp for their own comfort. The sufferer would rather be left alone. The pain of suffering can dull the sense of connection and community for which God created us.

God's Presence

Remember Joseph in Lesson 2, “*God's Sovereignty When I Feel Afraid*”? No doubt in his long days, weeks, months and years of unjust imprisonment he woke up each morning wondering if today was his last day on earth. In addition, Joseph didn't know God's reason for it all till he was reunited with his father and brothers! He must have felt alone and abandoned—except God, the ever-present faithful One was “with” him. When your comforters leave, will God be with you? How can you experience his presence when you feel alone? Let's find out!

S.O.A.P. 1 – God's Determination

Apart from David's Psalm 23 – “*The Lord is my shepherd...*” – perhaps no other psalm is more memorable than his Psalm 139. Here David captures God's very presence in an interesting way. Written in the first person it is meant for you to read or speak it from your own heart and lips. Read it slowly out loud and understand God's determination to be “with” you.

S.cripture – Read Psalm 139

O.bservations

1. How does David destroy two misunderstandings that God can only be found in a religious building or that man can hide from him?

2. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you measure God's determination to be acknowledged in your presence?
Somewhat 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Relentless

A.plications

1. Have you ever thought or felt that you could either hide from God or only find God in a religious building of some kind? What's your story?
2. If the above were true, how would you feel about God's compassion or availability to be with you in your suffering?

P.rayer – Thank God that in your suffering he is pursuing you and wants you to pursue him.

S.O.A.P. 2 – How Close is God?

As Jesus entered the final hours before his crucifixion, his emotional suffering reached a fever pitch in the Garden of Gethsemane. Out of his feeling of loneliness he expressed his disappointment with the disciples who couldn't stay awake to pray "with" him. While they were well intentioned, they were inadequate. So Jesus turned to God the Father alone, the One whom he trusted and never disappointed him. Let's discover how close the very presence of God is when you feel alone in suffering.

S.cripture – Read John 14:15-24; Hebrews 11:6

O.bservations

1. Write down the statements of promise in John 14 that Jesus makes regarding the presence of God in those who love him.
2. To love God is to "*earnestly seek him*" (Hebrews 11). In your opinion where does faith and belief come from or rest on?

A.plications

1. How does it make you feel that God the Father, Son [Jesus Christ] and Holy Spirit actually make their "home" in you? Describe as best you can.

2. Describe how you presently “seek” God and how “earnest” you are about it?

P.rayer – Thank God for being “at home” in you and tell him your desire to pursue him more consistently.

S.O.A.P. 3 – The Better Thing

It should be noted in John’s gospel that Jesus “...loved Martha and her sister [Mary] and Lazarus...” (John 11:5). While not three of the twelve disciples, they were three of many more who followed Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah sent from God. Their home in Bethany, two miles outside of Jerusalem, was a familiar place in the itinerate ministry of Jesus. On three occasions we find deep insights into the relationship Jesus had with these siblings. While Jesus loved them, he told Martha that Mary chose “*the better thing*”. Let’s discover what it was!

S.cripture – Read Luke 10:39-42; John 11:32; John 12:1-8

O.bservations

1. On all three occasions where is Mary found and what is she doing that Jesus said of her, “Mary has chosen the better thing”?
2. On the other hand, what do you think Martha missed when she was “distracted”, “worried” and “upset” with “many” things?

A.pPLICATIONS

1. What are the things that cannot be taken away from you when you regularly sit at the feet of Jesus?
2. Describe how the “things” above will prepare you for your own sufferings.

P.rayer – Thank God that you can sit at the feet of Jesus. Ask him to give you ears to listen and a heart to love him more.

Understanding God's Presence When I Feel Alone

Practice the Presence

In 1666, Nicholas Herman of Lorraine, France, became a follower of Jesus Christ at the age of 18. Uneducated he entered a monastery in Paris as Lay Brother Andrew. For the next 62 years he worked every day in the kitchen and participated in the daily prayer sessions. He discovered in his own soul that God was as near to him in the kitchen as he was at the altar. So he walked and talked with God all day long. His personal fellowship with God drew the attention of Bishop Beaufort who engaged Brother Andrew in conversations and correspondence. They were preserved and published following Brother Andrew's death and entitled, The Practice of the Presence of God. One quick quote:

“If we know how much He [God] loves us, we should always be ready to receive equally and with indifference from His hand the sweet and the bitter...and if our love for God were great, we should love Him equally in pains and pleasures.”

Today many followers of Jesus Christ follow at a distance. They may stop by on Sunday morning to say “hello”, but for the most part they choose to be consumed with “lesser things” throughout the week. Like Martha they misunderstand the value and nature of God's presence and are ill-prepared for suffering. Unlike Martha, Mary chose the “better thing” of sitting at the feet of Jesus before she suffered. What Mary experienced could not be taken from her, so she suffered well. God in Christ was not a stranger to Mary!

Suffering and Comforting Well

The Apostle James wrote a letter to Jewish and Gentile Christians throughout the Roman world of the first century. Among the many challenges they were facing which he addressed was their suffering from persecution. Tucked away in chapter 4, verse 8, he writes, “...*come near to God and he will come near to you....*” If it were not for the reality of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit living and being “at home” you as Jesus taught in the upper room (John 14), this statement by James would give the impression that God is far away. But the reality and truth is found in our experience. When you choose to come close to God, you will experience his nearness deep in your soul. God gives you his constant presence, but it is you who must give him your attention to experience his presence and suffer well. God is always with you and waiting for your attention and awareness of him!

Lesson 5

God's Word

When I Can't Think Clearly

Suffering can take us to a dark place emotionally and mentally in which our imaginations run wild and cloud reality. While we imagine the worst, what is true and real slips away. A severe suffering can take you on a downward spiral of depression ending in despair. Our inability to think clearly grows in this drift from reality. What is real and always true that you can cling to in your suffering? What can stabilize your emotions, keep your imagination in check and clarify your thoughts?

God's Word

Only what God has spoken can capture your runaway thoughts that would overwhelm you. Is the Bible just another book or is it like no other? To understand God well is to pursue him in his Word. Think of the scriptures as an ongoing conversation with God. Think of his written word as his voice to you. God's Word is a light in the dark event of your suffering. Let's discover more.

S.O.A.P. 1 – Sustaining Truth

While sinless, Jesus Christ identifies himself with a sinful humanity at a baptism of repentance conducted by John the Baptist (John 1). Afterward Jesus is led by God's Spirit into the wilderness for a severe suffering and testing. There he entered a period of fasting that lasted 40 days and nights. It's hard to imagine how drained he must have felt and his inability to think clearly. In his weakened condition Satan confronts him and offers three irresistible false promises that a strong man would be hard pressed to resist. Let's look in.

S.cripture – Read Matthew 4:1-11

O.bservations

1. Describe how weak and vulnerable Jesus was to Satan's offers of food, fame, power and wealth.

2. Describe how confident Jesus was in the written words of God the Father.

A.plications

1. Can you remember a time or event or a suffering when the truth of God’s Word clarified your thinking and made a difference in your life? Tell your story here:

2. Can you think of a time you shared the truth of God’s Word with someone and it made a difference in their life? Tell your story here:

P.rayer – Thank and praise Jesus for his story and the difference God’s Word made in his temptations and sufferings.

S.O.A.P. 2 – Preparation for Suffering

After Jesus called his disciples to follow him, he was drawing crowds from town to town as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God (Luke 8:1). On one occasion he told a parable to the crowd but explained its meaning privately to his disciples. To summarize the meaning of the parable we could say, “The condition of your heart (soil) determines the impact or harvest of God’s Word (seed)” in your life. Let’s look in.

S.cripture – Read Luke 8:1-15

O.bservations

1. In your own words describe how the first, second and third soils (hearts) are too weak to yield any growth that is fruitful.
First Soil:

Second Soil:

Third Soil:
2. In your own words, how valuable is the good heart that is noble, hears, retains and perseveres by the Word of God?

A.plications

1. Which “soil” do you feel right now best describes the condition of your heart and why?
Circle one:
First Second Third Fourth
Why?

2. What change or changes would it take for you to better prepare your heart for suffering?

P.rayer – Tell God that you desire to receive his word in greater measure.

S.O.A.P. 3 – Your Emmaus Road

Your expected or unexpected suffering can drop you into an emotional free-fall that feels nightmarish. Hope is dashed and the future has little or no meaning at all. The loss could be acute and impossible to reclaim. Such was the experience of two followers of Jesus from the town of Emmaus not far from the city of Jerusalem. They went to the city to observe the Passover only to witness a crucifixion that crushed their hearts. Let's look in.

S.criptide – Read Luke 24:13-35

O.bservations

1. After all these two men had heard or knew or witnessed or believed about Jesus, list the possible emotions or thoughts that could have gone through their minds before Jesus approached them.

2. How would you explain their experience – *“Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us?”* (verse 32)?

A.pPLICATIONS

1. Have you ever been so distracted by your suffering that you lost sight or awareness of Jesus or God's truth? Yes _____ No _____
If yes, tell your story here:

2. If no, how did the truth and power of God's Word sustain your clarity of thought and/or maintain your emotional stability?

P.rayer – Thank God for his powerful word that is life-giving and life-sustaining.

Understanding God's Word When I Can't Think Clearly

The Eternally Powerful Word

In addition to the statement of Jesus to Satan in the wilderness conflict, “*Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God*” (Matthew 11:4), every Apostolic letter in the New Testament underscores Christ's high view of scripture. For instance Peter wrote, “*No prophecy has its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit*” (II Peter 1:21). He adds this thought as well, “*...you were born again...through the living and enduring word of God*” (I Peter 1:23). The Old Testament scriptures likewise underscore the power of God's words. Through the prophet Isaiah God makes this declaration:

*“So is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. Isaiah 55:11*

God's word is life-giving and eternally powerful, so much so that it's as powerful today as it was when first spoken. The Bible as a sacred writing is not mere words on paper, but God's very voice to all of mankind.

Suffering and Comforting Well

The Apostle John records the promise given by Jesus in his upper room teaching that he would send the Holy Spirit of God whom he calls, “*...the Spirit of truth who guides you into truth...*” (John 16:13). The truth of God and about God is what you need when emotions cloud your reason. Like a little child who feels threatened clings to the leg of his mommy or daddy for security, so the suffering child of God can cling to the Father for safety. The words of God in the scriptures are your Father's voice to help you think clearly when emotions overwhelm you. Meditate on God's words to you in the days and nights of your suffering.

The following lesson, *God Listens When I Feel Like Crying*, is reassuring as you cling to the truth of your heavenly Father's words and pour out your heart to him.

Lesson 6

God Listens

When I Feel Like Crying

God created you with deeply felt emotions often expressed by tears. You live for tears of joy and laughter experienced at births and weddings and other events of success. On the other hand, we avoid the tears of suffering and sorrow if we can. Using the words of the Apostle Paul to the Christians in Rome, it is easier “...to rejoice with those who rejoice...” than, “...weep with those who weep...” (Romans 12:15).

Why is that? Obviously the tears of suffering create socially awkward moments for both the sufferer and the comforter. The sufferer often apologizes to the comforter, “I’m sorry to put you through this.” On the other hand, the comforter is often at a loss for words and feels helpless to help and thinks, “When will this be over so I can leave.” The curse of sin has left all of us with limitations. We are all emotionally challenged and fragile. Even good comforters need to detach and re-energize their emotional strength.

God Listens

When your comforters leave, who will listen to your cries for help and comfort? There is One with whom there are no awkward moments. There is One who never leaves and listens with pure compassion. In your suffering you have God’s ear when you feel like crying.

S.O.A.P. 1 – The Book of Prayers

It has been commonly held by followers of Christ that the Old Testament Psalms is a book of prayers. Many of the psalms or prayers contain two interwoven themes: first, the tears of lament to the God who listens, and second, the tears of joy over the God who intervenes. They capture well the nature of God and his response to us in our suffering. Since the psalms were inspired by God’s Spirit, we can pray them back to him with confidence when we feel like crying. Consider three excerpts from many examples.

S.cripture – Read Psalm 18:1-6; 34:1-10; 61:1-5

O.bservations

1. List the words the psalmist uses to describe God’s strength as he cries out in prayer.

2. For David the “fear” of God is positive, so how and why is that true?

A.plications

1. Why is worship and praise important as you cry out to God in your suffering?

2. What are some of your personal sufferings that caused you to cry out to God?

P.rayer – Thank God for the Psalms that give you freedom and permission to cry out to him.

S.O.A.P. 2 – Your Father’s Listening Ear

Since God is all-knowing, all-powerful, all-wise and everywhere present, his capacities are limitless and immeasurable. His ear is like the mother’s ear that recognizes her baby’s cry in a nursery of crying babies! Your heavenly Father’s ear is bent toward you. Your cry is always heard whether audible or silent. Unlike the earthly gods and idols of man’s making that “...*have ears but cannot hear...*” (Psalm 115:6), your heavenly Father hears your cry and is always moved by the tears of your suffering.

S.cripture – Read Psalm 115:1-13

O.bservations

1. In your own words explain the personhood of God based on the comparison of the God of “heaven” and the earthly gods or idols of man’s making.

2. What makes the gods and idols so appealing to the people who make them?

A.plications

1. From your personal experience, what makes the personhood of God so appealing and important to you?

2. Describe how important it is to you to be heard when you cry out in your suffering?

P.rayer – Thank God for his personhood and his desire to listen to you when you cry out in your suffering.

S.O.A.P. 3 – Your High Priest

There are sufferings that are so severe that you'll feel completely helpless and speechless to even pray. When you are at a loss for words and your soul feels empty, God's love in Christ is so great and generous that he will not leave you helpless or speechless. The following understanding of God is a powerful reality you can claim for yourself! Find it! Claim it! And never forget it!

S.cripture – Read Hebrews 7:20-25; Romans 8:8:22-34

O.bservations

1. How does the powerful reality of the prayers of intercession offered by Christ and the Holy Spirit describe the love and compassion of God in our suffering?

2. Why do you think the Bible exhorts us to pray for one another (James 5:16) when we already have the High Priestly ministry of Christ?

A.pPLICATIONS

1. Have you ever felt like the speechless person Paul describes in Romans 8:26? Tell your story here:

2. How does it make you feel now that when you were speechless to pray for yourself, Christ and the Spirit were praying for you?

P.rayer – Praise and thank God for his great love and compassion toward you when you feel powerless and speechless to pray!

Understanding That God Listens When You Feel Like Crying

The Cry of Your Heart

Since the disciples often observed Jesus in prayer and even witnessed the miraculous results of his prayers, it is no surprise that they asked Jesus to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1). Jesus responded by giving them a simple yet profound outline known as “The Lord’s Prayer”. Yes, there is a lot to learn about prayer in the scriptures, but don’t make the common mistake. When you read the prayers found in the scriptures or hear the prayers of seasoned saints don’t say, “I wish I could pray like that!” God does not grade your prayers on the proverbial “curve” and answers the “best” ones first and turns a deaf ear to the “worst” prayers. Like a good earthly father, God is not interested in the eloquence of your words but rather the cry of your heart.

Regarding the tears of sorrow, it is also interesting to find various cultures throughout the world that engage in extreme emotional responses to sufferings whether mild or severe. People cry differently from uncontrollable weeping with paid mourners to stiff upper lip of denial to the stoical saving face. Also found are people with damaged emotions (suppressed or repressed) who have survived abuses or other horrific traumas. The curse of sin has wounded all of us in many different ways and degrees.

Suffering and Comforting Well

Thankfully for all of us and you, neither eloquence nor literal tears are required for God’s listening ear to hear your cry and respond with love, care and comfort. No sufferer has an advantage over another. Your heavenly Father hears the cry of your heart even when your tongue and lips are speechless. How great is your Father’s love for you that he listens to the most excellent prayers offered by Christ and the Holy Spirit on your behalf? How amazing and wonderful and comforting is this reality for you as a child of God? Suffer well--your Father hears your heart cry!

Lesson 7

God's Love

When I Feel No One Cares

Both sufferers and comforters feel uncared for at times. Each is limited by two realities of life. The first reality is that each has their own personal mix of pain and anxiety. We are all poor swimmers on the sea of suffering. Even care-giving comforters, whether loved ones, friends or professionals, are emotionally limited and need to be cared for.

The second reality for both sufferers and comforters is the limitation of time. Love and care are momentary at best no matter how great our love for one another may be. Even in the most severe suffering, loving care is interrupted and rarely constant.

God's Love

So who can you turn to for uninterrupted love and care? Who knows you best, loves you the most and is always there for you? It is God himself who has no limitations, is never too busy and never far away to love and care for you. Let's find out more!

S.O.A.P. 1- The Watchful Shepherd

In God's written Word he uses metaphors so we can understand the many dimensions of his nature. In the Old Testament he often refers to himself as the shepherd of Israel his flock (Jeremiah 23:1-4). Sheep are fragile and vulnerable creatures that require constant watchfulness and care. And so do we! David the shepherd-boy experienced God's loving and watchful care and described it perfectly in his beloved Psalm 23.

S.cripture – Read Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34:11-16

O.bservations

1. From Psalm 23, make a list of the ways God gives care.

2. From the brief look at God the shepherd of Israel in Ezekiel 34, how determined is he to care for his own? Circle one:

Somewhat Determined 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely Determined

A.plications

1. Have you ever experienced a kind of “valley of the shadow” suffering? If so, briefly describe it here:

2. If so above, were you in a place spiritually to trust God for his loving care? Yes _____
No _____ If yes, how did God care for you?

P.rayer – Thank God for his loving and caring nature.

S.O.A.P. 2 – The Good Shepherd

Out of God’s great love “...*he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16). Jesus Christ was sent to become “...*the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world...*” (John 1:29) through suffering for man’s debt of sin. This Lamb of God declares himself to be the good shepherd of everyone who believes in him. Notice the loving care that Jesus Christ has for you.

S.cripture – Read John 10:1-18

O.bservations

1. According to Jesus, what has he done or will do to prove his love and care as the “good shepherd” and “the gate”? List as many as you can find.
Good Shepherd:

Gate:

2. How does Jesus deepen your understanding of God’s self-description as the shepherd of Israel in Ezekiel 3?

A.plications

1. Jesus said that his sheep listen for his voice and he leads them. How well do you listen for his voice and how would you describe it?

2. Why is it important to you that Jesus the good shepherd knows your name?

P.rayer – Tell Jesus of your desire to listen for his voice and follow him. Thank him for knowing your name and all that that means to you.

S.O.A.P. 3 – God’s Vast and Precious Thoughts

John’s inspired gospel, along with his letters, describes the bottomless depth of God’s incredible love. Two simple statements are enough, “*God is love*” (I John 4:16) and “*perfect love casts out fear*” (I John 4:18). That is an immense and powerful love! While God is constantly present with you (lesson 4), he is not an unmoved witness to your suffering. Out of his constant powerful love he cares for you. If you have children of your own, you know that most of the time they are unaware of your constant love and care for them. Such is true of you as God’s child. His thoughts of you are vast and precious (Psalm 139:17)!

S.cripture – Read Psalm 139:1-24; Romans 8:28-39

O.bservations

1. According to David (Psalm 139), how well is God aware of you and cares for you? Write down 2 or 3 ways that grabbed your attention.
 - (1)
 - (2)
 - (3)
2. According to Paul in Romans 8, how did Christ secure God’s constant love and care for those who love him?

A.pPLICATIONS

1. In what ways does God love and care for you surpass the love and care offered by others?
2. Describe how it makes you feel that nothing can separate you from God’s love and care.

P.rayer – Thank God for his immense love for you and his constant care especially when you suffer.

Understanding God's Love When You Feel No One Cares

You Are Not a Burden

In suffering it's a common mistake for both comforters and sufferers to have unrealistic expectations of one another. At times these expectations result in angry conflict. Thankfully God is never out-of-touch or overburdened by unrealistic expectations.

On the other hand, sufferers sometimes are heard to lament, "God doesn't care" or "God is too busy" or "I'm not worthy". None of these are true. These are the thoughts of self-pity that lead to the darkness of despair. God is not an unaffected witness to your suffering. As your heavenly Father, he is deeply moved, and out of his love he grieves over you. God remains "at home" in you by the Spirit of Christ (John 14:23). He is emotionally strong in you and for you. His love for you is constant. You are never a burden to him.

Suffering and Comforting Well

Even in death you cannot be separated from God's love and care. In death God is "with" you (Psalm 23). Paul asked, "*Death, where is your sting?*" (I Corinthians 15). When you understand God well, the answer is simple yet powerful. If you have followed Jesus in life, you will follow him in your death. He has removed the sting. Jesus will go with you through your passing from this life of suffering into the life of eternal joy and peace. If death can't separate you from God's love, then nothing else can! You are under his watchful care.

Lesson 8

God's Peace

When I Feel Hopeless

One thing that sets humankind apart from the rest of creation is our mental capacities. Like God, we remember our past, analyze our present and imagine our future. Throughout each day we can switch from one to the other in a moment. For the most part, regardless of our past and present, we are hopeful for a better or more pleasant future. But when we enter an extreme suffering, our peace and hope for that future is stolen from us. Thoughts of the future are filled with dread and heartache. Some sufferings are so life-changing that a “new normal” seems impossible to accept. To be hopeless is frightening and overwhelming.

God's Peace

But if your faith and trust securely rests on the finished work and person of the Lord Jesus Christ, two permanent realities exist outside of your present suffering, extreme or otherwise. The first is the power of God's peace, and the second is the certain hope of eternal life with Christ. Take a brief look at these two realities—God's peace when you feel all hope is gone.

S.O.A.P. 1- Peace With God

The curse of sin separates us from God and leaves us hopelessly lost. But in His great love, God takes the initiative to restore our peace with him. In a conversation with Nicodemus in John's gospel, Jesus sums it up this way: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16). God's love was sacrificial (“he gave”) and unconditional (“whoever believes”). Mankind did not deserve God's love or earn it, but it must be believed and received. John wrote, *“...to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God”* (John 1:12). In that moment of faith we are spiritually reborn and the hope of eternal life is implanted in our heart. Peace with God is restored and the certain hope of eternal life is enjoyed throughout our earthly journey.

S.cripture – Read Colossians 1:15-23; I Peter 1:3-6

O.bservations

1. From Paul's letter to the Christians in Colosse, what did Christ do to offer mankind peace with God and hope?

2. According to Peter, what makes our hope alive as opposed to mere “wishful thinking”?

A.ppllications

1. How did you come to peace with God through faith in Christ as your Savior? Briefly write your story here:

2. How would you describe your hope of eternal life?

P.rayer – Thank God for making peace with you through the death and resurrection of Christ making you a child of God.

S.O.A.P. 2 – The Peace Of God

Having peace with God through faith in Christ not only implants in our heart the hope of eternal life, but on this earthly journey we have unlimited access to the peace of God. Since the Lord Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, lives in us and reigns over us, we are recipients of the pleasures of his peace even when our present condition or future circumstance is anything but peaceful or hopeful. The peace of God is not the result of delusion or fantasy or visualization. It comes from God and is not of your own making. This peace is God’s gift to his children. His peace strengthens the soul to endure and persevere through times of suffering. Notice the Apostle Paul’s description of the power of God’s peace in his letter from a Roman jail to the Philippian Christians.

S.cripture – Read Philippians 4:4-9; John 14:15-27

O.bservations

1. In addition to God’s presence, “The Lord is near”, Paul exhorts the Philippians to pray. Why does prayer access the peace God desires to give us?

2. According to Jesus in John 14, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are “at home” in you to give you peace. How does that explain Paul’s statement in Philippians 4:7?

A.ppllications

1. Can you remember a time of anxiety when you prayed and God gave you an unexplainable peace? Briefly tell your story here:

2. How important should your prayer life be now to prepare you for your times of suffering?
Somewhat Important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely Important

P.rayer – Tell God that you desire to spend more time in prayer and fellowship with him each day.

S.O.A.P. 3 – John The Hopeless

In the Bible record we hear John the Baptist declare after baptizing Jesus, “*He must become greater and I must become less*” (John 3:30). Little did John know that “less” would mean his rather untimely martyrdom. Falsely accused, he was thrown in prison to await his beheading (Matthew 14:1-12). This no doubt was not the future John imagined or hoped for. In desperation of losing all hope, John sends a message with a question to Jesus. Discover what it was and how Jesus answered John.

S.cripture – Read John 1:19-35; Matthew 11:1-19

O.bservations

1. John seems to be a life “cut short”, but did he live and die in vain? Explain

2. In your own words, how did Jesus answer John’s question and how did it restore his peace and hope?

A.pPLICATIONS

1. In your moments of doubt and hopelessness, what would Jesus want you personally to remember?

2. In your suffering, what would you like God to say to you that would give you peace and hope for your future?

P.rayer – Ask God to give you his words of assurance to give you peace and restore your future hope.

Understanding God's Peace When I Feel Hopeless *Restored Hope*

In John's (not the Baptist) gospel we find Jesus weeping on several occasions which gives us permission to grieve in our suffering and over our losses. But the Apostle Paul in his inspired letter to Thessalonian Christians wrote, "*We grieve, but not like those who have no hope*" (I Thessalonians 4:13). Your present suffering may leave you with a very different future than you imagined or planned; or the extreme perhaps--no earthly future at all. In either case, God's indescribable peace will restore your hope for a different and better future. It's yours when you pursue God and come near to him (James 4:8).

Jesus was well aware that feelings of hopelessness were part of the human condition of suffering. Suffering is the thief that steals the future of your own making. But there is another future--a future of God's making. When your suffering is at its worst, God's future for you remains greater and brighter than anything you could imagine whether you see it or not on your earthly journey. Ultimately, nothing is wasted and God's love never disappoints. God will restore your hope if you look beyond your suffering to the good he has done and has planned for you. Paul wrote:

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

Suffering and Comforting Well

God secures your future and gives you his peace when you feel hopeless. Paul also wrote, "*...whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord*" (Romans 14:8). With eternity in our heart we have a certain hope even in death. So much so that we can say, "I have more to die for than to live for." This is what it means to suffer well when your earthly future is gone. You can enjoy the peace of God because you enjoy peace *with* God. Your future hope is secure in Christ Jesus!

Lesson 9

God's Joy

When Nothing Makes Me Glad

As a reflection of God's nature, we were created with the capacity to experience extreme emotions simultaneously. It seems impossible to believe that even joy and grief can be felt together. For instance, a parent can feel both joy and grief when their child gets on the bus for kindergarten or their teenager goes off to college the first time.

When we suffer, our emotion for joy and gladness takes a big hit. In extreme sufferings, gladness can disappear. Grief consumes with no room left for light-heartedness. We wear on our face what we feel deeply in our soul. Gladness can't be worked up by the trite humor or encouragements of misguided comforters.

God's Joy

Could it be that just as "God is love" and cares for you, and just as God is our peace and hope, that God is also our joy? Yes! Deep within the fellowship of the Godhead—Father, Son and Holy Spirit there is immeasurable and indescribable joy. And could it be that even in our experience of suffering there is also an unexplainable joy God imparts to his children? Let's find out more!

S.O.A.P. 1 – The Joyful God

We tend to think of our creator as hard to please, humorless and joyless. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Since mankind alone bears God's image, we are his greatest and dearly loved creative achievement. Like earthly parents, God fathers over us with great joy. Not only does God's Holy Spirit grow the fruit of joy in his children (Galatians 5:22), but God's kingdom is a "...matter of...righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17-18). One of the most beautiful descriptions of God's joy is found in his message through his prophet Zephaniah. Check it out.

S.cripture – Read Zephaniah 3:14-20; I Thessalonians 1:4-6

O.bservations

1. How would you like to hear your heavenly Father sing a song of joy over you? Circle a number or word:
Interesting 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Absolutely!
2. As best you can, describe how God's Holy Spirit within you brings joy even in suffering according to I Thessalonians 1?

A.ppllications

1. In your suffering how might God delight in you to give you joy?

2. How do you feel now about God’s joyful nature?

P.rayer – Ask God to delight in you in your suffering and quiet you with his love.

S.O.A.P. 2 – The Joyful Savior

No doubt Jesus experienced great joy in his earthly ministries of delivering helpless and hopeless people from their sufferings. The gospels are filled with accounts of his miracles. While he found joy in what he did, his inward joy was a constant. While his mission required a great humility and a great suffering (Philippians 2), his great joy did not skip a beat. In fact, his joy was his great motivation in completing his mission.

S.cripture – Read Hebrews 12:1-3; John 15:9-11, 16:22-24, 17:13-19

O.bservations

1. What was the object of Christ’s joy that motivated him to endure the suffering of crucifixion?

2. Describe how eager Jesus was in his upper room teaching (John 15-17) for his followers to experience Divine joy?

A.ppllications

1. How would you measure your eagerness to receive God’s joy even in your suffering?
Somewhat Eager 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely Eager

2. What do you find in Jesus Christ that gives you a joy that suffering cannot take away?
List as many as you can.

P.rayer – Ask the Father for his joy when the circumstance of your suffering steals all your earthly joys.

S.O.A.P. 3 – Your Joy

The Apostle Paul wrote, “*All things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose*” (Romans 8:28). “All things?” “Even my sufferings can work for good?” What makes this difficult to believe is your misunderstanding of God’s sovereignty (see lesson 2), or your understanding of “good”. Your definition of good is most likely very different than the “good” God has in mind. His good is not restricted to our comfort and pleasure. Often God’s best “good” is achieved through suffering. The ultimate “good” is God’s salvation achieved for mankind through the ultimate suffering of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 2:10). God’s good is so good that you will agree with the outrageous statements of James and Peter. Check them out!

S.cripture – Read James 1:2-4; I Peter 1:3-9

O.bservations

1. While God is not the blameworthy cause of your suffering, how does he use it to test your faith (James 1)?

2. How does Peter describe the “mature” and “complete” faith that James stated?

A.pplications

1. What is most important to you--your comfort or your faith and why?

2. In your opinion, how does a mature and deep faith overcome the sorrows of suffering?

P.rayer – Tell God that you desire the joy of his fellowship to overcome the sorrows of suffering.

Understanding God's Joy When Nothing Makes Me Glad

Empty Remedies for Sadness

All the natural earthly sources of joy can suddenly turn on us or disappear altogether. The godless turn to many remedies to relieve their mental, emotional, moral or physical pain. The God-shaped vacuum in the souls of humankind is stuffed with a near endless list of things that at best only mask the pain momentarily. So the unfulfilled godless return to their empty remedies for sadness and pain over and over again or search for a new remedy.

Suffering and Comforting Well

When there was no earthly reason for joy in the midst of Israel's calamities, the prophet Habakkuk concludes his prayer on behalf of God's people,

*"Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.
The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the
feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights."* Habakkuk 3:18-19

Likewise, in the Apostle Paul's concluding exhortations in his letter to the Philippian Christians, written from a Roman prison cell,

*"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!
Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.
Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation,
by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your
requests to God....I can do all this through him who gives
me strength."* Philippians 4:4-6, 13

While suffering robs you of your natural sources of earthly joy, God brings to you himself, the only source of lasting joy that never runs out. When your God-shaped vacuum is filled with him, you have a rich and constant resource of joy that never disappoints. When nothing earthly makes you glad, God's joy intervenes and is more than sufficient. All that God wants to be in you and for you is always enough. Our God is joy-filled. His Spirit grows the fruit of joy and our Savior was and is always joyful. This is our God. Understand him well and you will suffer well as the power of his joy strengthens you in your time of greatest weakness. Nehemiah declared to Israel, *"Do not grieve, the joy of the Lord is your strength"* (Nehemiah 8:10).

Lesson 10

God's Power To Forgive

When I Feel Rejected

Our fallen world has left everyone vulnerable to the sins of others. Who of us has not felt the pain of rejection emotionally or physically? Rejection dehumanizes us by attacking our identity, significance and worth. Rejection ranges from mere neglect to gossip, to false accusation, to verbal abuse, physical violence and abandonment. We feel rejection in betrayals whether in business, friendship or marriage. Rejection is also felt in persecution for one's faith ranging from mere sarcasm all the way to martyrdom.

God's Power to Forgive

Is there an understanding of God that brings healing to the wounds of rejection? Or are we left to our own misunderstandings like, "time heals all wounds"? Can God empower us as his children to resolve the suffering of rejection and renew our identity? Yes he can! But not with what we naturally think or desire. As fallen moral creatures we cry out for justice and punishment, but God has in mind something far more powerful and liberating. It is something that always works! Let's discover in God's Word his power to forgive when we suffer rejection.

S.O.A.P. 1 – God's Exclusive Claim

God makes many exclusive claims about himself; the world he created and his plans and promises past, present and future. But regarding the sins committed against you and the suffering of rejection that wounds your soul, God has made an exclusive claim that we dare not make our own. To do so is a grave disobedience that leads to your own self-destruction. This can't be over-stated!

S.cripture – Read Deuteronomy 32:32-35; Romans 12:17-21

O.bservations

1. In your opinion, what qualifies God to make and possess the exclusive claim to vengeance?

2. Based on Romans 12, what is lost when we seek revenge on those who reject us by sinning against us?

A.ppllications

1. Of the many methods of revenge, what are the ones that you use most often? List as many as you can think of.
2. Why do you feel “right” and “good” are so important for those who are followers of Christ?

P.rayer – Ask God to forgive you if you have vengeance in your heart toward someone or you have acted in a revengeful manner in an effort to “get even”.

S.O.A.P. 2 – God’s Forgiveness

Jesus Christ faced every form of unjust rejection (John 1:11). Beginning in his hometown of Nazareth to the highest religious authorities and ending with the Roman civil authority, Jesus was the rejected suffering servant of God (Isaiah 53). He was verbally abused, falsely accused and ultimately crucified though he committed no crimes or sin against anyone. Even among his closest followers he was betrayed and denied. Yet he said of himself, “*I have overcome the world* (John 16:33). How did he “overcome” and how can we?

S.cripture – Read Matthew 5:38-48; Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2

O.bservations

1. How would you describe the standard for love and forgiveness that Jesus teaches in Matthew 5?
2. Based on Ephesians 4 & 5, how would you describe the power of forgiveness?

A.ppllications

1. What will empower you to live up to the standard of love and forgiveness Jesus teaches?
2. What part does God’s forgiveness of you play in your forgiveness of others?

P.rayer – Ask God to help you understand more deeply that his forgiveness of you was undeserved. Thank him that his grace or undeserved love was freely given to you without any conditions.

S.O.A.P. 3 – Accessing the Power to Forgive

The power to forgive those who reject you in any way, to any degree, is available to you by God’s grace. The Apostle Paul wrote to persecuted Christians in Philippi: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus...he humbled himself and became obedient to death...” (Philippians 2:5, 8). In the face of the greatest rejection in the history of the world, Jesus did not defend himself or retaliate. By his love and compassion he responded redemptively to forgive sin. What Jesus did you can do by his grace as well. How can you access the power to forgive? Find out here.

S.cripture – Read Matthew 6:9-15; Luke 23:32-43

O.bservations

1. In your own words describe the importance of forgiveness in prayer that Jesus teaches in Matthew 6.

2. Does it surprise you that Jesus practices forgiveness in prayer as he endures the greatest unjust rejection of all time (Luke 23)? Circle one (no wrong answer)!
Yes! 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 No!

A.pPLICATIONS

1. Have you ever practiced forgiveness in prayer as Jesus did? _____ Yes _____ No
If yes, tell your story:

2. Do you mistakenly wait for an apology that never comes? _____ Yes _____ No

P.rayer – Tell the Father that from now on you will practice forgiveness in prayer to him when others sin against you.

Understanding God’s Power to Forgive When I Feel Rejected

The Prison of Unforgiveness

Those who sin against you and reject you will live “rent-free” in your head. Grudges die hard, if at all. Many, if not most, of the emotionally unhealthy people today were wounded by the sins of rejection and then entered the prison of unforgiveness and are not even aware of it. Dr. Lewis Smedes wrote a most profound description of God’s power to forgive: “To forgive is to set the prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you!” The writer of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews described the impact of bitterness in the soul of the one who refuses the grace of God to forgive others. He writes,

“Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.”

Hebrews 12:14-15

Forgiveness seems counter-intuitive to our deep-seated sense of moral justice. But no amount of revenge and punishment will ever remove your bitterness. Only the grace of God’s power to forgive will release you.

Suffering and Comforting Well

When you feel rejected by the sins of others against you, understand whole-heartedly and embrace God’s power to forgive. Remember the following: First of all, only a holy and just God can avenge the sins of humanity. Your own unholiness disqualifies you from avenging the sins against you. When someone sins against you they sin against a holy God. And when you avenge those who sin against you, you sin against God as well. This is why vengeance belongs exclusively to God (Romans 12:19). When you withhold forgiveness, you avenge in your heart the sins against you and fall out-of-fellowship with God (I John 1:5-2:11). Your suffering will never end as long as you choose unforgiveness and vengeance. Vengeance is a fool’s errand. There is no third option—avenge or forgive!

Second, on a positive note, God’s unconditional love that forgave your sin against him and set you free from his justice and vengeance will empower you to forgive others. This power is a life-changing reality God desires to give his children. Like Jesus and Stephen, don’t wait for an apology. Simply pray and tell the Father you choose his power to love and forgive. You will suffer well and comfort well.

For a deeper study see *The Life In The Vine*, lesson 3 on *The Fruit of Love* at www.branchesinthevine.com

Lesson 11

God's Mercy

When I Feel Ashamed

Another thing that is certain--we all suffer for making wrong choices. Some choices are made in ignorance, others in foolishness and still others in willful disobedience or sin. Some wrong choices can be reversed and remedied quickly, while others carry enormous and long-lasting consequences for both ourselves and others. Often one wrong choice leads to a trail of such choices making life quite messy! Guilt and shame follow our sins against God, ourselves and others. We are suffering victims of our own wrong choices. What should we understand about God when we feel guilt and shame over our sinful choices?

God's Mercy

Unfortunately the subtitles found in the Bible text are not inspired. In the parable of the "Lost Son" in Luke 15 we tend to focus on the two sons when Jesus wants us to understand the father's heart of mercy. While there is a contextual, historical and cultural background that gives additional meaning to the parable, our focus here is on the mercy of God our heavenly Father when we feel ashamed by wrong and sinful choices. Take the time now to read the parable in Luke 15:11-32 and then we'll look at it more carefully.

S.O.A.P. 1 – The Father's Will

At first glance the father in Christ's parable seems rather permissive toward his youngest son. On the other hand the father could have been over-protective or over-bearing and denied the kid's request, but he allowed the son to make the wrong choice. Remember in lesson 1 that God the Father created mankind in his own image which includes the freedom of choice so that mankind would either choose to love and obey the Father or reject and disobey. Christ's parable fits the creation narrative in Genesis 1-3.

S.cripture – Read Luke 15:11-12; II Peter 3:9

O.bservations

1. By these verses only in Luke 15:11-12, how would you describe God's fatherhood on a scale of 1 to 10?

Permissive 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Overbearing

Why?

2. What does II Peter 3:9 tell you about God's nature?

A.plications

1. How would you describe your ability and history of making wise and healthy decisions?

2. What sinful temptations are strong in your life right now?

P.rayer – Lord, show me what I have squandered or am wasting in my life right now.

S.O.A.P. 2 – The Father’s Discipline

While God the Father clearly decrees his protective commands, his response to disobedience is not permissive or overbearing. Rather he allows sin to run its course so the suffering and shame will awaken mankind to return to him. Like a refiners fire the Father allows sin to bring your moral impurities to the surface and awaken your conscience. Let’s see how it worked out in the parable.

S.cripture – Re-read Luke 15:13 – 20a; then read Romans 2:14-15

O.bservations

1. The father allowed the son to make a wrong choice, so why didn’t the son blame the father?

2. In your opinion, how does Romans 2:14-15 explain Luke 15:17?

A.plications

1. The wayward son did not blame the father for his wrong choice, but how about you?
How often do you blame God or others?
All the time 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Never

2. If you are in the “pig pen” of sin, what is holding you back from returning to God the Father of mercy?

P.rayer – If you are presently in a “pig pen” of sin whether great or small, are you willing now to humbly pray a prayer of confession and ask the Father to forgive you?

S.O.A.P. 3 – The Father’s Mercy

A simple and memorable description of mercy is “withholding what is justly deserved to grant what is needed.” The father in the parable perfectly describes the nature of the heavenly Father. The son’s conscience accused him and he knew he deserved punishment for his sinful choices. But the father recognized this and granted what his wayward son really needed.

S.cripture – Re-read Luke 15:20-32; II Corinthians 7:8-11

O.bservations

1. Since the father in the parable represents God the Father, what do you think he observed that moved him to be merciful?

2. Based on II Corinthians 7, what words describe Godly sorrow?

A.pPLICATIONS

1. How would you measure the effectiveness of your conscience to accuse or excuse your moral choices?
Not Effective 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very Effective

2. Describe how easy or difficult it is to humble yourself and ask for forgiveness from those you have sinned against?

P.rayer – Ask God to strengthen your conscience and awareness and sensitivity to temptation and sin. Thank him for his great mercy.

Understanding God’s Mercy When I Feel Ashamed

The Wayward Son and the Faithful Son

Both sons in the parable were in need of their father’s mercy. The wayward son felt the shame and guilt of sinful choices. On the other hand the “faithful” son questioned his father’s mercy. Perhaps his question exposed his jealousy, or sense of entitlement, or lack of gratitude. But God our Father’s unconditional love and mercy spans the continuum from outward to inward waywardness. God’s mercy is available to all. Also remember that good works or penance are unacceptable in the light of Christ’s cross and empty tomb. The just payment for your sins has been paid by another for your waywardness.

Suffering and Comforting Well

Since God our Father is neither permissive nor overbearing, what triggers his mercy that releases your guilt and shame? This is no mystery. The answer is found in God's self-disclosure. Through the prophet Isaiah God says,

*“For this is what the high and exalted One says—
he who lives forever, whose name is holy:
I live in a high and holy place,
but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly
and to revive the heart of the contrite.”* Isaiah 57:15

“Coming to your senses” is choosing humbly to return to the Father of mercy, to confess your sin (agreeing with God), and repent (turning away from sin to pursue God). Where there is no humility there is no sorrow, and where there is no sorrow there is no repentance and no forgiveness and reconciliation. The result is your distance from the Father will grow. Don't wait to be caught or you may become angry and defiant which leads to blame-shifting just like Adam in Genesis 3.

While the Father's mercy is readily available, there is also the Biblical case for seeking the forgiveness of those you have sinned against (lesson 10). In addition there is also a Biblical case for restitution or righting the wrong when possible (Luke 19:1-10).

Come to your senses quickly. The Father of mercy waits for your return!

For a further and deeper consideration of humility, see Life In The Vine, lesson 4, at www.branchesinthevine.com

Final Thoughts

For Sufferers and Comforters

This study was never meant to cover the vast topic of human suffering but rather to lay a spiritual foundation. Only by faith and trust in the God who revealed himself in the Lord Jesus Christ can we suffer well and comfort well. These “final” thoughts are not final at all. There is much more, but let’s wrap it up with these thoughts.

Comforting Well

As has been said, comforting the suffering is exhausting emotionally and physically. But for children of God, comforting is a family value if not a mandate--“...weep with those who weep...” (Romans 12:15). Consider four challenges we face as comforters.

First of all, Jesus expands the scope of your comforting to include your “neighbor”-- ouch! In Luke 10 we find Jesus in a conversation with an expert in the law given to Moses. This expert knew the law’s summary “to love God with your whole being and your neighbor as much as you love yourself” (Leviticus 19:18 – my paraphrase). To justify himself, he questions Jesus, “Who then is my neighbor?” Jesus responds with a parable of a suffering Jew and a comforting Samaritan. It was not what the “expert” wanted to hear! Your neighbor could be someone very different from you in race or culture or language or religion. In addition, the Samaritan was not looking for someone to comfort, therefore the suffering Jew was an inconvenience. Your challenge may be “getting over” your differences and inconveniences to love and comfort your neighbor well who unexpectedly shows up on your pathway!

The second challenge to comforting well may be the overwhelming number of opportunities around you. Add to that your life is fragmented by family, vocation and other responsibilities to which you must give time and energy. Solution? Simply, “live in the Spirit...walk in the Spirit...be led by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16, 18, 25). The opportunities God gives you by his Spirit will bring him the greatest glory. You will not be the best comforter for every sufferer you encounter. Don’t be overwhelmed with false guilt, but help them find the better comforter. This is easier in the loving family of God.

A third challenge to comforting well is unique to close loving relationships found in marriage and family life. When a spouse is comforting their suffering spouse, both are suffering in different ways. There is great agony in watching the suffering of the other. Several years ago my wife had a high fever that wouldn’t break. I finally took her to the emergency. She was admitted and taken to the intensive care unit. She laid there for four days sleeping most of the time. A team of four doctors ran multiple tests and asked me endless questions. The oncologist/hematologist suspected the worst based on her extremely high white cell count. After ten days I took her home with a normal white cell count, but the doctors never did diagnose the cause. But we knew God knew, and he spared her life. While Sharon suffered, I was the “suffering comforter”. That is the unique challenge in all family relationships.

The fourth challenge to comforting well may be your own suffering. Now that sounds weird—right? What do I mean? Sometimes the comforter is comforted *by* the sufferer who is suffering well. As a pastor I had the experience many times of visiting the suffering only to be blessed by the sufferer who was experiencing deeply the love and peace and even joy of the Lord. My faith was made stronger as I witnessed what only God could do. I was there to have God’s touch spill over on me! Sharon and I “dropped in” unannounced on a friend in Vermont. We hadn’t seen Bill in several years. The last time he was the picture of health, but not that day. He was enduring a painful bout with cancer. When we sat down I asked, “Bill, tell us about the cancer.” We listened to his long and detailed explanation of the treatments interspersed with his experiences with God which he called miracles. We saw with our eyes and heart a brother in Christ who was walking two journeys simultaneously—one in the flesh, the other in the Spirit. His faith and trust in the Lord in his physical weakness and his peace and hope and joy in suffering were both a comfort to us and a witness of God’s grace. I’m not sure if Bill was aware that our visit was unforgettable to us. For us he is a “poster boy” for suffering well!

Comforting well and suffering well are not mutually exclusive. Understanding God well releases you from self-absorption and self-pity to be a blessing to others. Understanding God well helps you break through these four challenges to comforting well. So comfort well, my friend. Comfort well.

Suffering Well

So by now, I trust you have come to the conclusion that your suffering, whatever the cause, is not all about you. That God, who is never the blameworthy cause, can use your suffering for his glory and your ultimate good. Jesus underscored this truth when he answered the question, “*Was this man born blind because of his sin or the sins of his mother and father?*” Jesus said, “No, he was born blind to display the glory of God” (John9:1-5). In this event the glory of God was evidenced by the man’s miraculous healing at the hand of Jesus.

But miraculous healings are not the only evidence of God’s glory. When Jesus appeared to Ananias regarding Saul [Apostle Paul] he said, “*...I will show him [Paul] how much he must suffer for my name*” (Acts 9:16). Paul’s sufferings are legendary, but he suffered well on many levels too numerous to mention here. But one suffering was a chronic physical problem which Paul prayed three times for the Lord’s healing. The answer was, “No”. Why? “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*” (II Corinthians 12:7-10). God’s grace always leads to his power, and his power leads to his glory in Paul’s life and yours when you suffer well. Your weakness is God’s opportunity to display his glorious power in you when you understand him well.

To suffer well is to emerge from the refiner’s fire purified and humbled. Spiritually broken and self-less, you will be more like Christ and have greater opportunity to impact others for the glory of God. As Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, “*...so that we can comfort others in trouble with the same comfort we ourselves have received from God*” (II Corinthians 1:4). So again, your suffering is not all about you. God’s sovereignty makes your suffering far reaching like a pebble thrown in a pond creates ripples.

A Post-Script

As a post-script to my story in “Let’s Get Acquainted”, several years ago I was coaching a young Japanese pastor. I felt led to share my story of God’s loving presence and his deep touch that I experienced in my “dark night of the soul”. He responded by telling me about his Christian mother back in Japan who also survived cancer. He said she told me, “I miss the cancer because it took me so close to the Lord.” Along with me, my friend Bill and our sister in Christ in Japan, we understood God well enough, to suffer well enough, to experience a depth of God’s grace that gave us an unexplainable peace and joy, restored our hope and secured our future. We came to the conclusion, using the words of the Apostle, “*Whether we lived or died, we belonged to the Lord*” (Romans 14:8). We are not saints. We are not special. We are common Christ-followers who deserve nothing. We merely “drew near” to God. Come and join us. Suffer well my friend. Suffer well.

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