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The Origin of Suffering

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THE ORIGIN OF SUFFERING

To illustrate in drama fashion what really transpired in the beautiful Garden of Eden at the moment of the fall, consider the following scenario:

Adam and Eve are comfortably located in their lovely garden park home. Suddenly there is a loud pounding on a side entrance of their home.

Adam: "Who's out there? What do you want?"

Intruder: "My name is sin. You've never met me, I know, but I'd like to come in and help straighten you two out concerning some of your outdated fundamentalist hang-ups. You'll find humanism far more satisfying to the flesh than holiness. I want you to taste some of my special goodies, *for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as God, knowing good and evil.*"

Adam: "Well, I guess it's okay to come on in. But remember, this is more my wife's idea than it is mine."

Adam walks over and opens the door. He is immediately knocked down and stripped of his clothes by two vicious and horrible appearing individuals. Eve runs over to Adam. By this time they both are thoroughly frightened. In a trembling voice, Adam asks:

Adam: "What are you two? Where did you come from? Why have you treated us this way? What do you want from us?"

First Character: "My name is Physical Death and sin sent me. If you think I've hurt you so far, just wait until you see what I'm going to do. From this point on I plan to plague your fleshly body with ailments, injuries, pain, anger, loneliness, despair, frustration, and whatever other tortures I can think of. Finally, I'll yank your soul from your body and dump your lifeless corpse into a grave!"

Second Character: "My name is Spiritual Death and sin also sent me. I'm ten times meaner than Physical Death. I intend to fill you with the dread of dying and to keep you at any cost from knowing God. My ultimate goal is to land you right in the middle of the eternal lake of fire!"

Of course this exact conversation never actually took place in Eden, but the theological truths expressed in these sentences actually occurred.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF SUFFERING

Let us begin by offering a grocery list summary of the various kinds of suffering recorded in the Word of God.

Sufferings caused by diseases and infirmities:

1. Barrenness: Suffered by Sarah, Hannah, and Elisabeth (Gen. 16:1; 1 Sam. 1:6; Luke 1:7)
2. Boils: Suffered by Job and Hezekiah (Job 2:7; 2 Kings 20:7)
3. Blindness: Suffered by Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46)
4. Bloody flux: Suffered by Publius' father (Acts 28:8)
5. Dropsy: A man in Luke 14:2
6. Deafness: A man in Mark 7:34-35
7. Dumbness: A man in Matthew 9:33
8. Demon possession: Suffered by Mary Magdalene, a boy, a girl, and a man (Mark 16:9; Matt. 17:18; 15:28; Mark 5:2)
9. Fever: Suffered by Peter's mother-in-law (Matt. 8:14, 15)
10. Issue of blood: Suffered by a woman in Matt. 9:20
11. Lameness: Suffered by three men (John 5:5; Acts 3:2; 14:8)
12. Leprosy:
13. Palsy: Suffered by the man in Luke 5:18

Sufferings caused by punishments:

1. By banishment (Rev. 1:9)—John the Apostle
2. By imprisonment (Gen. 39:20-23)—Joseph
3. By beatings (2 Cor. 11:24)—Paul
4. By slavery (Exod. 1)—Children of Israel
5. By attempted burning (Dan. 3)—Daniel's three friends
6. By a lion's den (Dan. 6)—Daniel
7. By attempted hanging (Esther 5)—Mordecai
8. By stoning (2 Chron. 24:21; Acts 7:59)—Zechariah and Stephen
9. By blinding (Judges 26:21; 2 Kings 25:7)—Samson and Zedekiah
10. By crucifixion (John 21:18-19)—Peter
11. By beheading (2 Tim. 4:6)—Paul

Sufferings caused by mental pressures:

1. Rape (2 Sam. 13:14)—Tamar
2. Mockery (2 Kings 2:23-24)—Elisha
3. Wayward children (Lev. 10; 1 Sam. 2; 8; 2 Sam. 15)—Sons of Aaron, Eli, Samuel, and David
4. Disharmony in the home (Gen. 16)—Abraham and Sarah
5. Deceit in the home (Gen. 27)—Jacob and Isaac
6. Immorality in the home (Gen. 19)—Lot and his daughters
7. Bad blood in the home (Gen. 27)—Esau and Jacob
8. Envy in the home (Gen. 30)—Leah and Rachel
9. Unfounded criticism (Exod. 5)—leveled against Moses
10. Insurrection (Num. 16)—caused by Korah
11. Misunderstanding (Josh. 22)—among the twelve tribes
12. Betrayal by associates (2 Sam. 17)—David's associates
13. Cursed (2 Sam. 16)—David
14. Threatened (1 Kings 19)—Elijah
15. Plotted against (1 Kings 21)—Naboth

ATTEMPTED ANSWERS CONCERNING SUFFERING

Because suffering is both so universal and unsettling, it is not at all surprising to find many attempted answers to explain this dreaded dilemma. Here are but a few of the suggested solutions:

1. **An evil former life.** Eastern religions which advocate reincarnation offer this interesting answer, namely, that all suffering in one's present life is simply a punishment for those wrongs committed in a former existence. If this be true, what blood-thirsty monsters Joseph, Job, Jeremiah, Paul, and Christ must have been in previous lives!
2. **Dualism.** Like reincarnation, dualism is a vital plank in the platform of some Eastern religions. In essence it says there are but two gods (or principles) governing the universe, one good and the other bad. They are equal, eternal, and non-contradictory.
3. **Fatalism.** The Islamic community with its hundreds of millions accept the most frightful suffering with a shrug and the comment, "It is the will of Allah!"

4. **Hedonism.** This is the modern playboy philosophy to pain. If it feels good, do it twice! Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die! In other words, the answer to pain is to substitute it with pleasure. Replace it with sex, money, power, drugs, or whatever else turns one on!
5. **Evolution.** This says simply that suffering, like digestion, is part of life. We are assured that for some unknown reason, those accidental and uncaring mechanical forces which brought life out of nothing into existence, also programmed that life organisms would suffer before they eventually pass into eternal oblivion.
6. **Stoicism.** The stoic would tell us suffering can be overcome merely by ignoring it.
7. **Christian Science.** According to its founder, Mary Baker Eddy, the solution to pain and suffering is to utterly deny its presence, for in reality neither exist, except as error in mortal minds.
8. **A powerless God.** This proposal concludes that the God of the universe, while possessing pity, does not exercise complete power. In other words, like some earthly doctor, he stands by helpless and frustrated in the midst of human woe.
9. **A pitiless God.** Here we have just the opposite of a powerless God. This position holds that God indeed possesses sufficient power, but is short on compassion. Thus, all sorrow and suffering can be directly traced back to an indifferent deity.
10. **Personal sin.** This answer rests upon the basic assumption that it is never in the perfect will of God for a Christian to suffer, especially if the suffering lies in the physical realm of sickness. Therefore, the conclusion is that all physical suffering in the life of a believer must be directly and only attributable to some personal sin in his or her life.

SOURCES OF SUFFERING

Suffering Source Number One: Caused by Satanic activity

During his conversation with Cornelius, Peter explains to this Roman Gentile the words of both Christ and Satan: “. . . how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him” (Acts 10:38).

Suffering Source Number Two: Caused by ungodly men

The Apostle Paul wrote of this in his final words to Timothy: “Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works” (2 Tim. 4:14).

Suffering Source Number Three: Caused by the world’s system

The Old Testament patriarch Lot, living in a perverted Sodom was painfully aware of this terrible pressure from a wicked world system. In his second epistle, Peter mentions this: “. . . for

that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds . . .” (2 Peter 2:8).

Suffering Source Number Four: Caused by the believer’s own fallen nature

Paul struggled, as do all of us, against his fallen nature. In some detail he records this for us:

“For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members” (Rom. 7:15, 18-19, 21-23).

Suffering Source Number Five: Caused by other carnal Christians

The Scriptures describe the terrible sufferings endured by our Lord while upon this earth. But I believe one of the most severe was the mental anguish caused by being denied at the mouth of his own most trusted disciple—Simon Peter. The gospel account informs us that Christ actually overheard these terrible denials. We read:

“And a certain servant girl, seeing him as he sat by the fire, looked intently at him and said, ‘This man was also with Him.’ But he denied Him, saying, ‘Woman, I do not know Him.’ And after a little while another saw him and said, ‘You also are of them.’ But Peter said, ‘Man, I am not!’ Then after about an hour had passed, another confidently affirmed, saying, ‘Surely this fellow also was with Him, for he is a Galilean.’ But Peter said, ‘Man, I do not know what you are saying!’ Immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, ‘Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times’” (Luke 22:56-61).

Few will disagree that the most crushing mental pain imposed upon a Christian on occasion comes from another Christian. To be unfairly criticized and mistreated by those belonging to the same family of God and household of faith can prove to be almost unbearable.

REASONS FOR AND BENEFITS OF SUFFERING

There are at least twenty-two reasons for and benefits of suffering.

ONE: To produce fruit in our lives

During his final midnight walk through the deserted streets of Jerusalem en route to Gethsemane, our Lord spoke the following words to his disciples: *“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit” (John 15:1-2).*

The Scriptures present at least five kinds of spiritual fruit produced through purging.

A. The Fruit of Patience

“And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance . . .” (Rom. 5:3).

“. . . knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (James 1:3-4).

“For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise” (Heb. 10:36).

B. The Fruit of Joy

“For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life; weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning” (Psa. 30:5).

“Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy. He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him” (Psa. 126:5-6).

C. The Fruit of Knowledge

“Blessed is the man whom You instruct, O LORD, and teach out of Your law” (Psa. 94:12).

We learn some things from prosperity, but we learn much more from adversity.

D. The Fruit of Maturity

“But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you” (1 Peter 5:10).

“Sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better” (Eccles. 7:3).

E. The Fruit of Righteousness

“Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:11).

TWO: To silence the devil

One of the most dramatic confrontations of all time between God and Satan is described in the ancient book of Job. Satan arrogantly stands before the Almighty and brazenly attempts to tell him the only reason the patriarch Job faithfully served him was due to all the spiritual fringe benefits which accompanied this service.

Note this accusation: *“So Satan answered the LORD and said, “Does Job fear God for nothing? ¹⁰ Have You not made a hedge around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land”* (Job 1:9-10).

Satan then concludes his slanderous report by daring God to allow him, the devil, to remove all these wonderful things from Job. If this were allowed, he sneeringly predicted Job would turn

from God and actually curse Him to His face. Were these terrible charges valid? Would Job defect under persecution? The sovereign and all-knowing God of course needed no such assurance. But to silence the devil (among other reasons) and utterly disprove his vicious and unfounded taunts, God allows him to persecute Job.

THREE: To teach us

There are two very practical courses of study offered to those enrolled in the school of suffering.

A. Course Subject Number One: Dependence

Through suffering we learn to depend upon God. I think one of the most difficult statements of Christ for the average Christian to really believe is that little phrase at the end of John 15:5, *for without me ye can do nothing*.

B. Course Subject Number Two: Obedience

The author of Psalm 119 was enrolled in this course. Note his testimony:

"Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word. It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes" (Psa. 119:67, 71).

FOUR: To purify our lives

There are six key passages which teach this benefit of suffering:

"But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job. 23:10).

"For You, O God, have tested us; You have refined us as silver is refined. You brought us into the net; You laid affliction on our backs. You have caused men to ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; but You brought us out to rich fulfillment" (Psa. 66:10-12).

"I will turn My hand against you, and thoroughly purge away your dross, and take away all your alloy" (Isa. 1:25).

"I will turn My hand against you, and thoroughly purge away your dross, and take away all your alloy.

"Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction" (Isa. 48:10).

"The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests the hearts" (Prov. 17:3).

" . . . that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ . . ." (1 Peter 1:7).

FIVE: To make us like Christ

"Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness" (Heb. 12:9-10).

“Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy” (1 Peter 4:12-13).

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body” (2 Cor. 4:7-10).

SIX: To glorify God

“Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me” (Psa. 50:15).

Writing from a Roman prison, the Apostle Paul reminds the church at Philippi of his sufferings, and then says: *For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death (Phil. 1:19-20).*

SEVEN: To prevent us from sinning

“And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure” (2 Cor. 12:7).

EIGHT: To make us confess when we do sin

“When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was turned into the drought of summer. I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and You forgave the iniquity of my sin” (Psa. 32:3-5).

“I will return again to My place till they acknowledge their offense. Then they will seek My face; in their affliction they will earnestly seek Me” (Hos. 5:15).

“Come, and let us return to the LORD; for He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up” (Hos. 6:1).

NINE: To chasten us for our sin

“For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (1 Peter 4:17).

TEN: To prove our sonship

“And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: ‘My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives” (Heb. 12:5-6).

“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent” (Rev. 3:19).

ELEVEN: To reveal ourselves to ourselves

During one of Job's defenses against the false accusations of his three "friends," the frustrated patriarch cried out:

"My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go; my heart shall not reproach me as long as I live" Job. 27:6).

But through his intense suffering and a personal encounter with God, Job sees himself as he really is. Note his reaction: *Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job. 42:6).*

TWELVE: To help our prayer life

The prophet Isaiah gave testimony as to how this principle of suffering aided his countrymen, the nation Israel: *"LORD, in trouble they have visited You, they poured out a prayer when Your chastening was upon them" (Isa. 26:16).*

THIRTEEN: To become an example to others

"But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings" (2 Cor. 6:4-5).

"And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe" (1 Thess. 1:6-7).

FOURTEEN: To qualify us as counselors

"Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15).

"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2).

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ" (2 Cor. 1:3-5).

FIFTEEN: To further the gospel witness

During the second missionary journey, Paul and Silas are arrested, severely beaten, and confined in an inner prison with their feet cruelly secured in the stocks. But then the miracle happened:

"But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed. And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, 'Do yourself no harm, for we are all here.' Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. And he brought them out and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' So they said, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.' Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and

to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized. Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household” (Acts 16:25-34).

While locked up in Rome, Paul wrote a letter to the church at Philippi, which as we have already seen, was born during a midnight prison praise service. He assures the Philippian believers that some of the same wonderful things were happening at Rome:

“But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ” (Phil. 1:12-13).

SIXTEEN: To make us more than conquerors

“Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place” (2 Cor. 2:14).

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. (Rom. 8:35, 37).

SEVENTEEN: To give us insight into God’s Person

After his intense suffering, Job could say: *“I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You” (Job. 42:5).*

EIGHTEEN: To drive us closer to God

“If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you” (1 Peter 4:14, NAS).

“Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10).

NINETEEN: To prepare us for a greater ministry down here

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain” (John 12:24).

TWENTY: To provide for us a reward

“The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together” (Rom. 8:16-17).

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ‘Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you’” (Matt. 5:10-12).

TWENTY-ONE: To prepare us for the millennium

"If we endure, we shall also reign with Him" (2 Tim. 2:12).

". . . that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer" (2 Thess. 1:5).

TWENTY-TWO: To show God's sovereignty

In regards to God's sovereignty and our suffering, doubtless the greatest verse in all the Bible is Romans 8:28: *"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."*

As a final illustration of the beautiful relationship between sovereignty and suffering, consider the case of Joseph's persecution by his own brothers who sold him into cruel slavery (Gen. 37:28). How did Joseph himself react to this terrible injustice? Well, years later, after he had been appointed prime minister of Egypt, he testified to his repentant brothers:

"But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For these two years the famine has been in the land, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. And God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt" (Gen. 45:5-8).

"But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive" (Gen. 50:20).

REACTIONS TO SUFFERING

ONE: Expect suffering!

"Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12).

"Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness" (Heb. 12:9-10).

"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

TWO: Realize others suffer.

"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world" (1 Peter 5:8-9).

"No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

THREE: Don't try to understand all the reasons for your suffering.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and depart from evil" (Prov. 3:5-7).

FOUR: Commit your soul to God at the very beginning of your suffering.

Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator" (1 Peter 4:19).

"I lay down and slept; I awoke, for the LORD sustained me. I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around" (Psa. 3:5-6).

FIVE: Pray!

"Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me" (Psa. 50:15).

"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms" (James 5:13).

SIX: Don't despise it!

"My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD . . ." (Heb. 12:5).

At first glance this seems to be strange advice. What is involved in *despising* God's chastisement? It simply means to count it as nothing. We use the word differently today. To despise something means to hate or abhor it. But the biblical term here refers to lightly dismissing something as unimportant. In this same chapter (Heb. 12:16) we are given the example of Esau who despised his birthright. The Bible is not saying he hated it so much that he couldn't stand it, but rather it was so unimportant and trivial that he eagerly traded it for a bowl of vegetable beef soup! All this to say we are not to take God's chastening too lightly, lest the intended lesson be not learned.

SEVEN: Don't faint because of it.

". . . nor faint when you are rebuked by Him" (Heb. 12:5).

This of course is the other extreme from that of reaction number seven. It is just as bad to treat suffering too seriously as to regard it too lightly. The truth is, we sometimes overreact to God's chastisement. We pout, doubt, lie down and stay down when spanked by our heavenly Father.

EIGHT: Patiently endure it in a steadfast way.

"My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience" (James. 5:10).

"But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God" (1 Peter 2:20).

". . . rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer . . ." (Rom. 12:12).

"You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (2 Tim. 2:3).

NINE: Thank God for it.

“Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance” (Psa. 42:5).

“In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess. 5:18).

TEN: Rejoice in your suffering.

“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!” (Phil. 4:4).

“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials” (James 1:2).

“Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful” (James 5:11).

“And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name” (Acts 5:40-41).

ELEVEN: Don’t become a self-made martyr.

“Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed” (Heb. 12:12-13).

TWELVE: Don’t suffer needlessly.

“For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God” (1 Peter 2:20).

“For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil” (1 Peter 3:17).

“But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people’s matters. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter. For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (1 Peter 4:15-17).

THIRTEEN: Compare your present suffering with the coming glory!

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18).

THE CALL TO SUFFERING

Perhaps the most unknown, and certainly the most unusual, aspect of pain and discomfort is the fact that God Himself has called us to suffer. You note I did not say He merely permitted it, or reluctantly agreed to it, but in the counsels of eternity past actually issued a seven-fold call which included suffering. Let’s briefly examine each of these divine calls from the Creator to His redeemed creatures.

FIRST, there is the call to salvation.

“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified” (Rom. 8:28-30).

SECOND, there is the call to sanctification.

“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality” (1 Thess. 4:3).

“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it. (1 Thess. 5:23-24).

THIRD, there is the call to service.

“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

FOURTH, there is the call to separation.

“Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.’ Therefore ‘Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.’ ‘I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty.’” (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

FIFTH, there is the call to sonship.

“Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him” (1 John 3:1).

SIXTH: There is a call to subjection.

This subjection includes the following groups of individuals:

- a. Children to their parents (Eph. 6:1).
- b. Wives to their husbands (Eph. 5:22).
- c. Employees to their employers (1 Peter 2:18).
- d. Citizens to their country (1 Peter 2:13-14).
- e. Believers to God (Rom. 12:1-2).

SEVENTH: There is a call to suffering.

“For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps” (1 Peter 2:21).

“For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Phil. 1:29).

THE ASSURANCES IN SUFFERING

“He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me” (Psa. 23:3-4).

Both Old Testament and New Testament believers experienced this blessed presence in their sufferings. Note:

Jacob: *“Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it’” (Gen. 28:16).*

Joseph: *“But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison” (Gen. 39:21).*

Moses: *“My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest” (Exod. 33:14).*

Paul: *“Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city.’” (Acts 18:9-10).*

“But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome’” (Acts 23:11).

THE TERMINATION OF SUFFERING

“Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?’” (1 Cor. 15:24, 26, 53-55).

“For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life; weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning” (Psa. 30:5).

“For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:17-18).

“Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away’” (Rev. 21:1-4).