

SEEING SUFFERING FROM GOD'S POINT OF VIEW

SERIES: GREAT TRUTHS RECONSIDERED

by Doug Goins

We've come to an important theme in this series of messages. Our universal human experience is full of pain and difficulty and struggle and disappointment. We all face frustration, illness in one form or another, grief, and sorrow. For most people, life is not as they dream it should be. We can waste tremendous amounts of energy and material resources trying to make our circumstances conform to the myth of the good life, the way life "ought to be." But as followers of Jesus Christ, we have been called out of that way of looking at life. We have been called to see spiritual reality. There is a spiritual mystery of suffering that all of us have to deal with, a paradox: an all-powerful and loving God who allows suffering in our lives. Jesus is always there no matter what. But the struggle is to believe that, to flesh that out in our experience.

First Peter 1:5-6 reminds us that we are "protected by the power of God through faith" even when we have been "distressed by various trials." The power of God and the reality of suffering go together.

On my sabbatical, Candy and I were in Germany for a week in October visiting a dear friend named Wolfgang Breithaupt, a Lutheran pastor who directs a retreat center near the city of Greifswald in the north of Germany. Charlie Tucker and I visited him about six years earlier, and he's been here at PBC with his wife. On that earlier visit we sat in the office of the vice-mayor of Greifswald, a brother in Christ named John. He and Wolfgang had been friends since they were in seminary together. John had been a Lutheran pastor for a number of years, and then had moved into the political realm and had spend five or six years as the vice-mayor.

Now on this sabbatical, I sat with John once again, this time in Wolfgang's living room, and John poured out a tragic story. He had been literally run out of his position by the opposition party, who had no sympathy for his Christian view of things. Part of the reason that he had lost his job was because of his relationship to Christ. He had been given a very minimal pension to live on by the government. Even though he is only 55 years old, by German law, at 55 you are pensioned. He can't serve in a church ministry anymore for income. He can't serve in the political arena. And he was living way below the standard that he had been used to through the years. Because of the stress of all this, he developed chronic health problems.

It took awhile for him to open up, but as Candy and I listened he shared this heart-rending story and his discouragement and confusion about how God could allow this to happen, his embarrassment and sense of loss, and finally his sense of hopelessness about the future. A relatively young man, he concluded, "I'm not sure what I have to live for."

The New Testament letter of James, written by the brother of the Lord Jesus, was written to first-century Jewish Christians who were grappling with the same issues of suffering as my friend John. One of the central themes in the book is how Christians can respond to the harsh pressures of life. James deals with three specific forms of suffering in different parts of the letter. First, the first-century Christians were being persecuted for their faith in Christ. Second, they were suffering poverty. And third, some had the frustration of chronic illness.

Now, James' desire for his Jewish Christian brothers and sisters was that they would be able to understand their troubles from God's point of view, and that is my hope for us. Chapter 1 verses 1-12 offer us tremendous good news about life's trials. There are four important points in these twelve verses: (1) Our suffering doesn't have to cause discouragement. (2) Our suffering doesn't have to cause confusion. (3) Our suffering doesn't have to cause embarrassment or shame. (4) Our suffering doesn't have to make us hopeless.

Suffering doesn't have to cause discouragement

Verses 1-4 speak to this issue of discouragement:

James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad, greetings.

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your

faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Our suffering doesn't have to cause discouragement. But we are discouraged when we're blind-sided by unexpected suffering, and we cry out, "Why me? Why now? Why this?"

I saw this vividly in my son Micah a year and a half ago, at the beginning of his junior year in high school. He had played football as a sophomore and had played junior varsity ball. He had done well. He was so excited to play varsity ball as a junior, and he worked hard that summer lifting weights and working out. He endured the hot August double practice days. He got to the first football game, and on the very first play of the very first game, he broke his arm and missed the next six games of the season. I remember his struggle. Bless his heart, he did want to glorify God on the football field-so why would God allow that to be taken away from him? We all have those kind of questions.

It's important to know what's going on in the circumstances of suffering. The very first word in verse 3 is the word "knowing." That's an important word. It means experiential knowledge. When we understand and internalize spiritual reality, then we can respond to pain without discouragement. I'm not just talking about having a good, well-thought-out theology of suffering. What we need is God's perspective, and we're never going to have that without a relationship of loving intimacy with him, one that engenders trust in him. Verse 12 talks about the hope we have of eternal life, which God has promised to "those who love him."

Out of a relationship of love with our creator God comes an understanding that there is inevitability in suffering and that there is purpose to it. These are two things that we can know from God's heart.

We see that suffering is inevitable in the first two verses of the paragraph. In verse 2, James writes, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when [not if] you encounter various trials...." Literally, it's "whenever you encounter trials." Suffering is not an elective in life's curriculum; it's a required course. The apostle Peter made the very same point in his first letter to the Christians in Turkey when he wrote, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you...." (1 Peter 4:12). Suffering in the life of the believer is normal, not abnormal.

One of the important reasons for the inevitability of suffering in our lives as Christians is because of our identification with Jesus Christ. The Jewish Christians who originally received this letter were suffering terribly because they believed in Jesus as their Messiah. That's hinted at in verse 1 of the paragraph. He writes to those "who are dispersed abroad," literally "scattered." That term "scattered abroad" is always used in Biblical writing of people who have been dislocated because of their religious faith. They are really religious refugees. The apostle Paul wrote from a Roman prison to the Christians in Philippi, "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Philippians 1:29). In the last message we heard exactly the same principle in Colossians 1:24: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions."

Last week I thought about the various trials, to use James' language, that many of us face here in the body of Christ at PBC. There is tremendous diversity in our suffering. Some have suffered harassment or demotion in the work place, or even job termination because of refusal to violate Christ-honoring standards of ethics and morality. Some suffer with chronic illness that doesn't seem to have an end in sight. Some suffer the pain and difficulty of a failing marriage. Some suffer the anxiety of unemployment and uncertainty about being able to make ends meet. Some suffer the unexpected death of somebody they loved very much, who was central to their life. Some have a rebellious child who has brought great suffering into their family. Some are in love with somebody who doesn't love them. Some have depression that they just can't shake.

But verses 3-4 tell us it doesn't have to be discouraging, because God has a purpose in the suffering: "...Knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." It's easier to go through difficult times when we understand that there's a point to it. James is summarizing God's plan for growing us up in faith, for maturing us and ultimately perfecting us. The simple truth is that pain develops character. It's spiritually productive. "In this [the absolute certainty of our salvation] you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 1:6-7) Suffering, James and Peter are saying, is like a refining fire, proving us, testing us, assaying us, purifying us, preparing us for something. Suffering purges the impurities out of us just as fire purges impurities out of precious metal.

There is a consistent image in the Old Testament of God as the refiner, or sometimes the refining fire itself. God says to Zechariah (13:9),

**"And I will bring the third part through the fire,
Refine them as silver is refined,
And test them as gold is tested."**

Later in Israel's history, the prophet Malachi writes about God (3:2), "For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. And He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness." He will refine them until righteousness is fully developed in them. It's purposeful preparation for his glory. It's part of the process in which God is conforming us to his very character.

This is not an image of God standing over the bubbling pot with us in it, fiendishly rubbing his hands and saying, "I wonder if they'll get purified." We will; that's an absolute certainty. God is using suffering to purge fleshly dependencies and sinful elements out of our lives, leaving increasingly pure faith in us. In this process he needs to separate God-confidence, or pure faith, from self-confidence and confidence in the things that we hang onto on our own terms to make life work for us. Perhaps it's confidence in material wealth, retirement plans, savings accounts, or investments. Perhaps it's confidence in some human relationships that give us worth and value and identity. Perhaps it's our own intellect. You get paid good money to be really smart in this valley. Planning, preparation, our backgrounds, our education, manipulation of other people-when God turns the heat up, all those ugly dependencies come floating to the surface, and then God can skim them off the top. We can see them for what they are and repent of them.

My wife just called me on an area of my life in which there was pressure. That's what God does. He puts pressure on. We look terrific when there's no pressure. But then the heat comes, and the ugliness comes out. And Candy nailed me in an area where I was being manipulative. She said to me, "Do you really trust God in this?" In times like that you have to say, "Thank you, Lord," because then you can see it and repent of it.

Suffering doesn't have to cause confusion

Now, maybe you can accept all this theologically, but you're having a hard time seeing it work in your own life. Your circumstances are too overwhelming and confusing. Suffering can be terribly disorienting. But the good news is that God wants to give us the calming wisdom that we need, and all we have to do is go to him in prayer and ask for it. Our suffering doesn't have to cause confusion. Let's read verses 5-8:

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

We can count on having the confusion cleared away in this experience of suffering if two things are true. In verse 5, it says we must have an expectant heart, an openness or receptivity toward God; and in verses 6-8, it says we must have a submissive will toward God when we pray.

Think about this issue of an expectant heart. We're called to pray in full confidence that God will hear us, that he's eager to respond, that he really will give us the wisdom we need.

The concept of wisdom is important in the Bible. It's different from our modern idea of wisdom, which is that you're well-educated, you've read a lot of books, and you have a great deal of information at your disposal. In Biblical literature, wisdom is not really an intellectual quality. The most uneducated person in the world can be a wise person. It is the skill of living life successfully, even when life is a mess, when it's out of control, when there's horrible suffering going on. It is being able to integrate the truth that we receive from God into our lives and live it out so that we live in a godly way.

God is glad to give us wisdom, because that's the kind of God he is. Verse 5 says, "...Let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously...." Literally in the Greek it says, "...Let him ask from the giving God...." That's his nature. James 5:11 tells us that God "is full of compassion and is merciful" toward our suffering. He wants to give us the wisdom and the power to make the difficult choices we face in our suffering. He wants to give us peace, to stabilize us when everything is chaotic and out of control. We're to ask God for wisdom with expectant confidence that he is delighted to offer it. He isn't grudging. That's why it says in verse 5 that he gives it without reproach. He doesn't lecture us in the process. He is wonderfully open-handed.

The last stanza of Frances Ridley Havergal's beautiful gospel hymn *Like a River Glorious* summarizes this attitude of expectancy:

*"Ev'ry joy or trial
Falleth from above,
Traced upon our dial
By the sun of love;
We may trust Him fully
All for us to do-
They who trust Him wholly
Find Him wholly true.
Stayed upon Jehovah,
Hearts are fully blest-
Finding as He promised,
Perfect peace and rest."*

There's another issue that's raised in the middle of that stanza: this issue of trusting God wholly or completely. Only then will we find him completely true; only then will we find his generosity. And verses 6-8 raise this issue that we must pray with faith believing, not just expectantly but submissively. "But let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." The point is that if we don't have the wisdom that we need in suffering, it's because we don't really pray with complete abandonment to whatever God wills for us. We hedge our bets when we pray.

The complete opposite of that is the beautiful model of the Lord Jesus when he was in the garden of Gethsemane the night that he was arrested, and he prayed with all honesty, "Lord, if there's any way to get out of this suffering, if I can sidestep the cross, let it be. But it's not my will that counts; your will be done in my life." (See Matthew 26:39, 42; Mark 14:36.) Remember, he did understand the purposefulness of the suffering that he was called to endure.

Now, we know that we are not totally, absolutely free from doubt. We are wracked by all sorts of misgivings and apprehensions. Does this verse mean that if we have any doubt whatsoever, our prayer doesn't mean anything? No, the word for doubt here is a very strong word. It means in our heart of hearts not really believing in God's goodness and not really being willing to do what God shows us. Augustine wrote about this double-minded prayer. He said when he was an adolescent boy his prayer was, "Lord, make me pure, but not yet." And we often pray with this double-mindedness that makes it hard for God to respond. So these verses mean we are to pray, with all of our misgivings and doubts and apprehensions, "Lord, show me what your will is in the hard decisions of my difficult circumstances." God can give his wisdom only to people who really want all of him. Remember Jesus' words in the beatitudes, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6). We must have a hunger, a thirst, a desire to do whatever God wants us to do.

Are you willing to accept whatever God generously provides in response to your request for wisdom? What if it means staying in a difficult marriage? What if it means staying in a frustrating job? What if it means accepting singleness for your life? What if it means living with physical debilitation that will never go away? Are you sure you want God's answer? If so, the promise here is that you'll receive all the grace you need to untangle your present confusion.

Last week I got the following in an email from an old friend, Ed Donahue. (Ed was an elder at PBC Cupertino for a number of years.) The author is anonymous.

*I Asked For
I asked for strength, and God gave me difficulties to make me strong.
I asked for wisdom, and God gave me problems to solve.
I asked for prosperity, and God gave me brawn and brain to work.
I asked for courage, and God gave me dangers to overcome.
I asked for patience, and God placed me in situations where I was forced to wait.
I asked for love, and God gave me troubled people to help.
I asked for favors, and God gave me opportunities.
I received nothing I wanted; I received everything I needed.
My prayer has been answered.*

Suffering doesn't have to cause shame

In verses 9-11, we're told that our suffering doesn't have to cause embarrassment or shame if we cultivate God's perspective on circumstances.

But let the brother of humble circumstances glory in his high position; and let the rich man glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with a scorching wind, and withers the grass; and its flower falls off, and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away.

My friend John in Germany was feeling a tremendous sense of shame and embarrassment at the loss of his position and the privilege and prestige that went with it. I told you he was experiencing great loss financially, now that he was pensioned. Suffering always has some sense of deprivation and loss. Remember, this letter was written to a suffering community. Poverty was their reality. Most of them had lost material resources. The temptation for all of us is to evaluate our circumstances from a worldly perspective, and the world says that identity and worth and value come from whom we know and what we have and how we're viewed. Suffering diminishes our status as worthy human beings, while health and wealth and success are the true measures of self-worth and value in this world.

But James states bluntly that God doesn't see things that way, and neither should we. Living with obvious limitation and loss, we can have God's gracious perspective on our suffering. We can learn that true satisfaction comes from the inside, not the outside, and it comes from God and God alone. The person of faith suffering in his poverty can say, "How incredibly wealthy I am because of the riches in Christ and the tremendous spiritual blessings I have in the Lord Jesus!" And the Christian who has been blessed with wealth and health and powerful presence must say, "But I am a sinner saved by the grace of God, and God can strip away all my valued earthly attributes and resources in an instant." Both the wealthy person and the poverty-stricken person have to learn how to echo with Job, "Blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). In plenty and in want, God's blessing is consistent.

It's hard to live that way, because when you have much, you start believing that the credit belongs to you, and that somehow you're protected from suffering. In your heart of hearts you're saying, "Blessed be the name of hard work and whatever else accomplished this." And if you don't have anything, if you're poverty-stricken and you live with a sense of deprivation, it is really hard to say, "Blessed be the name of the LORD." But the goal is to see circumstances from God's perspective so that we don't live with shame and embarrassment.

I've told the story before of a woman I met when I was in junior high school. She lived about four doors down the street from us in Seattle, Washington. Her name was Helen Hayworth Lemmel. She was in her nineties. She had been born and raised in wealth in England, and was well-known as a songwriter. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Lemmel probably wrote seventy or eighty Christian hymns and gospel songs that were popular in the 1920s through the early 1950s. Mrs. Lemmel had married into nobility; her husband was a lord. But she was stricken with blindness as a very young woman, and her husband divorced her because he didn't want to be married to a blind woman. I don't know all the circumstances, but somehow she ended up destitute in Seattle, Washington, a ward of King County, living in a tiny room in a home where the rent was paid by the county.

You probably know the most famous song that Mrs. Lemmel wrote:

*"Turn your eyes upon Jesus.
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace."*

Every time we would visit her or she would come to our home, we would ask her how she was doing, and she would always say, "I am fine in the things that count." That's a godly perspective on things that could be embarrassing or humiliating.

Suffering doesn't have to cause hopelessness

Finally, in the very last verse of our section, which is a summary of what we've been looking at, our suffering doesn't have to result in hopelessness if we cultivate an eternal perspective on happiness. What is true joy in life? Remember in verse 2 he said, "Consider it all joy...." Now in verse 12 he says,

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

This is like a beatitude. We rejoice in the fact that there is an end. The suffering is not interminable, even though it's

inevitable. There is an ultimate eternal goal when every tear will be wiped away. There is the glorious light of eternal day shining at the end of the tunnel. The darkness of suffering will finally be vanquished, and we will experience perfection, wholeness, completeness. We will be eternally with the Lord.

So right now, whether we're rich or poor, healthy as a horse or struggling with chronic illness, surrounded by loving friends and family or living a solitary life, the truth is that the best is yet to come. And the good news is that this eternal life that we're looking forward to has started right now. The crown of life that we're promised here, we receive when we come into relationship with the Lord Jesus. We can live as victors. There is tremendous joy to look forward to in heaven, but we can live above the circumstances here.

The promise in verse 12 is certain; there are no conditions. When you look at the way the phrases are connected grammatically, there's a sense of sequence but not of condition. We could read it accurately, "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, for once he has been approved, *and he will be approved*, he will receive the crown of life...." It will be a completed process.

Again, it's because of God's nature. He finishes what he starts in people. James 5:11 says, "Behold, we count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful." He is a God of activity. Compassion and mercy are not passive attitudes. Compassion involves itself. Mercy is a resource, in God's case a supernatural resource. And who needs mercy? Helpless, paralyzed, hopeless people. The promise is that this God of mercy will move in and provide resources that neither we nor any social agency has.

One final thing about Helen Lemmel: she had in her room a little plastic organ on a table. It was like a child's chord organ. She would play that and cry and sing. She had this vision of getting to heaven and having a mighty, thundering pipe organ. She didn't see the little plastic organ as a disadvantage. It was just a foretaste of glory. This was a down payment on what God was going to do for her, and she counted on that. Another of her sayings was "I can hardly wait!"

Are you discouraged because of suffering? Know that suffering is inevitable and that it does serve God's purposes in your life. Are you confused, overwhelmed, disoriented by suffering? Consider the attitude of your heart toward the Lord—is it expectant, receptive? And are you willing to submit yourself to his desires for you in the midst of the suffering? Do you feel ashamed and embarrassed by the suffering in your life? Try to look at it from God's perspective, how he defines worth and value and significance. Finally, do you feel hopeless? The reality is that the best is yet to come. Cultivate an eternal perspective on happiness.

Our own Joanie Burnside wrote, "Would you trade in circumstances in your life that have brought you closer to him?" The most important thing in life is your love relationship with Jesus. If suffering has deepened that, strengthened it, enriched it, how could you challenge the suffering? Would you have wished it away if you could? Or in hindsight, was it worth the ground gained, the experience of knowing him on a level you never thought possible? What does suffering make room for in your life? Where will you allow it to take you? How will you allow God to use your suffering to comfort and connect with other people? Remember Paul's words, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake...." (Colossians 1:24).

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