

## Suffering Saints

*Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.*

***John 15:20***

*God has one son on earth without sin, but never one without suffering.*

***Augustine***

For the disciple of Christ, taking up the cross begins with sold-out surrender, continues through sacrificial service, and reaches its pinnacle in suffering.

ng saints. Suffering, for the disciple of Jesus, is to be found in anything that brings pain, from irritation to intolerable, from a cough to cancer, loss of a job to the loss of a loved one. Because we live in a fallen and broken world as fallen and broken people, suffering is simply a way of life on our way into glory. It has been a way of life for this contemporary Christian woman.

Born in 1949, the youngest of four daughters, she enjoyed riding horses, hiking, tennis, and swimming. On July 30, 1967, she dove into Chesapeake Bay after misjudging the shallowness of the water. She suffered a fracture between the fourth and fifth cervical levels and became a quadriplegic, paralyzed from the shoulders down.

During her two years of rehabilitation, according to her autobiography, she experiences anger, depression, suicidal thoughts, and religious doubts. However, she learned to paint with a brush between her teeth, and began selling her artwork. To date, she has written over forty books, recorded several musical albums, starred in an

autobiographical movie of her life, *Joni: The unforgettable story of a young woman's struggle against quadriplegia & depression*, and is an advocate for disabled people. In 2010, at the age of 60, Joni Eareckson Tada announced that she had been diagnosed with breast cancer and emerged from surgery upbeat and hopeful. 1

In her book, *A Place of Healing: Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering, Pain, and God's Sovereignty*, she outlines her theology of suffering.

Here at our ministry we refuse to present a picture of “gently Jesus, meek and mild,” a portrait that tugs at your sentiments or pulls at your heartstrings. That’s because we deal with so many people who suffer, and when you’re hurting hard, you’re neither helped nor inspired by a syrupy picture of the Lord, like those sugary, sentimental images many of us grew up with. You know what I mean? Jesus with His hair parted down the middle, surrounded by cherubic children and bluebirds.

Come on. Admit it: when your heart is being wrung out like a sponge, when you feel like Morton’s salt is being poured into your wounded soul, you don’t want a thin, pale, emotional Jesus who relates only to lambs and birds and babies. You want a warrior

Jesus. You want a battlefield Jesus. You want a rigorous and robust gospel to command your sensibilities to stand at attention.

To be honest, many of the sentimental hymns and gospel songs of our heritage don't do much to hone that image. One of the favorite words of hymn writers in days gone by was sweet. It's a term that doesn't have the edge on it that it once did. When you're in a dark place, when lions surround you, when you need strong help to rescue you from impossibility, you don't want sweet. You don't want faded pastels and honeyed softness.

You want mighty. You want the strong arm, an unshakable grip of God who will not let you go—no matter what. **2**

One of my favorite grace teachers is Jerry Bridges who has served with the Christian discipleship organization the Navigators since 1955. The first book of his I read was *The Pursuit of Holiness* back in 2006 and it absolutely rocked my world. His books have done much to shape my understanding of gospel truth and have helped me to preach and teach it to others.

Now for this section on the suffering saints, both Joni's book and Jerry's book *Trusting God, Even When Life Hurts*, will prove profitable for every disciple of Jesus who will inevitably experience storms and suffering along the way to the Celestial City. In this book, Bridges shares some of his personal story of suffering. He was born with physical conditions that limited his ability to engage in activities and sports with the other kids. At 14 years of age he witnessed his mother unexpectedly take her last breath. His first wife died of cancer. Jerry Bridges understands suffering so well because he has personally experienced so much of it.

Growing up one of my favorite songs was entitled *American Pie* by Don McLean. The song deals with the sudden and tragic deaths of Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, and two others when their plane crashed in the 1959. The song began the reference to the tragedy with "*The day the music died.*" At first listen it is easy to miss how the song references God's role (or lack thereof) in

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***The three men I admire most,  
The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,  
They caught the last train for the coast,  
The day the music died.***

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this tragedy.

In saying, "*They caught the last train for the coast*" the song is implying God not only had nothing to do with these deaths, but was absolutely powerless to stop it from happening. Unfortunately, many in the church today believe this pernicious error. Some pastors even attempted to provide comfort to family members who lost loved ones in 9/11 preached messages that told the grieving survivors there was nothing God could do to stop those planes from crashing into the Twin Towers. Because God is impotent and helpless in the face of evil, sin, and tragedy, He hops a train to remove Himself from the mess. Another way this lie is framed out is in the words, "God is either not all good, or not all powerful because of the suffering in this world." But the disciple of Christ knows better about the truth of suffering in light of the sovereignty of God.

God is all good and He is all powerful and He not only can do something about evil and suffering in this world, He has already done it. Jesus came and conquered sin and death with His perfect life, sacrificial death, and resurrection. However, inasmuch as sin no longer reigns, it still remains and because of this truth, we will have to deal with pain and suffering on this side

of glory. But God is in control of every bit of it and one day soon, in the new heavens and new earth, pain and suffering will be crushed under the weight of His glory. As my friend and seminary professor, Dr. R. C. Sproul said one day in class, *"If there is one maverick molecule somewhere in the universe, you cannot trust God for anything."* In other words, God is either in control of all things, which must include both pain and suffering, or He is in control of nothing. Let's take a look at the suffering saints under the headings of "the promise of it" and "the purpose in it."

### **The Promise Of It**

How often over the years I have pastored those going through difficult times. Ear too often we have to deal with the fall-out of faulty preaching and teaching people have sat under. The message of "Trust in Christ and live a trouble-free life" is as unbiblical as it is unbelievable to the seasoned saint. Conflict is promised by our Lord Himself.

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." **John 16:33**

The promise of suffering and pain did not start with these words of Jesus. We need to go all the way back to the Garden of Eden to see where God made the first promise of suffering and pain to our first parents.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" **Genesis 3:1-3**

I think we would all be in agreement that there is no greater source of suffering and pain on this side of the grave than the experience of death. As soon as Adam and Eve disobeyed they died spiritually. They went from walking with God in the cool of the day to running and hiding from Him. Spiritual death was instant. Physical death would soon follow and it is, as the line in the movie National Treasure says, "The debt that all men pay!" Some die slowly while others die instantly, but all go the way of the grave. And along the way, suffering and pain marks the life of every person, believer and unbeliever alike. The difference between the two is in how suffering is viewed. The believer sees God's purpose in the pain. The unbeliever sees only the pain without purpose.

So the disciple of Jesus should never be surprised by suffering. It is a promise being fulfilled by God as a result of the disobedience of our first parents in the Garden of Eden and it will not end for the disciple of Jesus until we're brought into glory or Jesus returns, whichever happens first. Tim Keller provides some comforting insight.

Some suffering is given in order to chastise and correct a person for wrongful patterns of life (as in the case of Jonah imperiled by the storm), some suffering is given not to correct past wrongs but to prevent future ones (as in the case of Joseph sold into slavery), and some suffering has no purpose other than to lead a person to love God more ardently for himself alone and so discover the ultimate peace and freedom. **3**

Let's take a look at a few more "painful" promises from our Prince, the apostle Paul and Peter.

Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. **John 15:20**

"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. **Acts 14:22**

In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. **2 Timothy 3:12**

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. **1 Peter 4:12**

Before we move on to the purpose of suffering, please notice what these verses are teaching. For the disciple of Jesus, the more we are doing for Him and the expansion of His kingdom, the more we are to expect and experience suffering and pain. As Peter points out, we are not to be surprised by suffering as if something strange were happening to us. The fact is, we should be surprised if we are not suffering at some level because, as disciples of Jesus, we have been promised the same kind of treatment the world gave to Him. No matter how high we attempt to build a wall of protection around our lives through health and wealth, family and friends, and comfortable living, the storms are eventually going to blow our way. Suffering has been promised to all. But let us never lose sight of the holy purpose for suffering in the life of the disciple.

### **The Purpose In It**

The Bible tells us that there are a number of God-ordained profound purposes in our suffering and pain.

- It is used as a testimony to the power, provision, and purpose of God worked in and through the life of the believer (**1 Peter 3:13-17**)
- It loosens our grip on the temporal things of this world to remove the dead husks of our unholy passions (**Romans 5:3-4**)

- It grows our capacity to comfort and care for others who are going through pain and suffering (**1 Corinthians 1:3-4**)
- It disciplines the disciple because God loves us too much to leave us in our sinful behavior (**Psalms 107:17**)
- It drives us into deeper intimacy with our Savior which generally shows up in a deeper prayer life ( ... answer this question: "When do you find yourself praying the most, on sunny days or when the storms are raging?")
- It allows the disciple to show the difference between the believer and the unbeliever in how we respond to the storms of life because disciples "do not grieve as those who have no hope" (**1 Thessalonians 4:13**)
- It prunes our pride as illustrated by the life of the apostle Paul and the thorn God gave him (**2 Corinthians 12:7**)
- It will also help us to begin looking more to the life to come than the life we are currently living, the life to come where there will be no more suffering, pain, and death (**1 Peter 1:3-7**)

Let me encourage you to make a study of Scripture to see the many purposes God has for allowing pain and suffering in the lives of His people. Perhaps one of the best explanations of God's purpose in our pain comes from the pen of C. S. Lewis:

God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. **4**

God uses pain and suffering to rouse us from our spiritual slumber and get our attention back on the things that matter most in life. This is exactly what happened in the life of the apostle Paul on the other side of his Damascus Road experience. No one needed to be awakened more desperately from his spiritual slumber than Saul (his birth name), the relentless persecutor of the

early Christian church. Everything that mattered to him prior to his conversion no longer mattered. Everything Saul valued before Jesus showed up—religious ritual, social status, the applause of man, personal accomplishment, financial security, what he called (PROFIT)—Paul now considers of no value (LOSS) for the sake of Jesus.

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. **Philippians 3:7-11**

You cannot know the power of “His resurrection” without first dying. Paul knew he would have to die in every way in order to live the resurrection power of his Savior. Paul knew that suffering went with his new job description ... a disciple of Jesus. And it was this disciple who laid out with clarity what the primary purpose and ultimate aim is in all of our suffering and pain.

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. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. **Romans 8:28-29**

The disciple is being conformed to the likeness of His Lord by any means necessary, and because of our self-absorbed sinful nature, God has

ordained to use pain and suffering as ministers of mercy in this process. Previously in this section on sold-out suffering, I used a quote from C. S. Lewis that helped shine a light on the surrendered life of the disciple of Jesus. Here is the conclusion of that quote as it relates to suffering and the purpose for it.

In the world as we now know it, the problem is how to recover this self-surrender. We are not merely imperfect creatures who must be improved. We are rebels who must lay down our arms. The first answer, then, to the question why our cure should be painful, is that to render back the will which we have so long claimed for our own, is in itself, wherever and however it is done, a grievous pain. Even in Paradise I have supposed a minimal self-adherence to be overcome, thought the overcoming, and the yielding, would there be rapturous. But to surrender a self-will inflamed and swollen with years of usurpation is a kind of death. We all remember this self-will as it was in childhood: the bitter, prolonged rage at every thwarting, the burst of passionate tears, the black, Satanic wish to kill or die rather than to give in. Hence the older type of nurse or parent was quite right in thinking that the first step in education is ‘to break the child’s will’. Their methods were often wrong: but not to see the necessity is, I think, to cut oneself off from all understanding of spiritual laws. And if, now that we are grown up, we do not howl and stamp quite so much, that is partly because our elders began the process of breaking or killing our self-will in the nursery, and partly because the same passions now take more subtle forms and have grown clever at avoiding death by various ‘compensations’. Hence the necessity to die daily: however often we think we have broken the rebellious self we shall still find it alive. That this process cannot be without

pain is sufficiently witness by the very history of the word ‘Mortification’. **5**

To be conformed into the likeness of Jesus is a lifelong pain-filled process and will not be completed until God brings us into glory. Our comfort comes in knowing what the end product will be ... Christ-likeness ... and that God will not stop until He has taken our mess and turned it into His masterpiece by any means necessary. As one anonymous writer said, “It is the crushed grape that yields the wine.”

Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. **Romans 5:3-4**

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. **James 1:2-4**

At first glance, it seems like James simply does not have a complete grasp of the reality of pain and suffering. It would seem to have been written from the pen of someone who was sitting in a comfortable office in some ivory tower. But the disciple of Jesus knows better. What James is doing is directing our attention away from ourselves and toward our Savior. James is calling us to rise above our natural understanding of pain and suffering and to see things from God’s sovereign perspective. J. I. Packer sums it up this way, “*When people know God, losses and ‘crosses’ cease to matter to them; what they have gained simply banishes these things from their minds.*” **6** As a disciple of Jesus, Dietrich Bonhoffer wrote these words, “To endure the cross is not tragedy; it is the suffering which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ.”

In my experience training athletes in a variety of sports, one of the things I like to teach them early is the concept of ...

### **BEGINNING WITH THE END IN MIND!**

To begin with the end in mind is to prayerfully consider what the end goal is that you are working toward. For everyone in athletics the end goal is always individual and personal. Beginning with the end in mind has proven to be a source of great encouragement and motivation for these athletes, especially on those days when training is the last thing they want to be doing. Frierich Nietzsche provides great insight for us in these words, “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.” I teach this truth to the athletes in our life coaching using the following phrase ...

### **IF YOU CAN SEE THE PROMISE, YOU WILL PAY THE PRICE!**

The promise of the end goal has great power in pulling us along to complete what we have started. When we cannot see the “promise” it is hard to walk the path, especially when that path becomes difficult. In essence, this is what James is doing here from a spiritual perspective. He knows the end goal and the promise to every disciple of Jesus is to be conformed into His likeness. So when we keep this in view, we will find it far easier to consider our challenges and trials as pure joy because of what they are ultimately producing in us. He is not saying there is joy in pain but rather, there is joy in knowing what that pain is producing. The only way to consider the trials pure joy is to know the purpose our God has in delivering them to His disciples.

With a right understanding of the promise of suffering, we are not surprised when it comes our way and in understanding the purpose in it, we do not shrink back from it. There is also a special blessing for the disciple of Jesus that can

only be found on the other side of pain and suffering. This is beautifully set forth in the pain and suffering of the first Christian martyr in the Bible.

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. **Acts 7:55**

The religious leaders were opposed to this disciple of Jesus because he lived, spoke, and served in the power of the Holy Spirit. Having been falsely accused of blasphemy against Moses and God, they arrested him and brought him before the Sanhedrin to be questioned. It is remarkable to read in **Acts 7:15** *“All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”* Even his look bothered the ungodly and strengthened their opposition to him. Then when Stephen finished his inspired indictment of the self-righteousness religious leaders, they seized him, dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death. Yet, God prepared Stephen for his suffering with a clear vision of his Savior in heaven. We know the promise that Jesus will never leave or forsake us no matter what. But there is also a special and supernatural intimacy awaiting all of the suffering saints of God.

## CONCLUSION

Why me? Why now? Why this? Why God? This is not the dialogue of a disciple of Jesus. Well, at least it is not the “daily” dialogue of a disciple of Jesus. But this sure was mine for a brief moment in time when our family was confronted with a season of struggle with our fourth and final child Zack (aka Tank). At the age of one, Tank was showing some signs of delayed development in some areas as compared to his older brother and sisters. With our pediatrician’s recommendation, we decided to watch for several months before we would have him tested. At 15 months, Tank had a series of 5 grand mal

seizures and was hospitalized for over a week. In trying to determine the cause of these seizures, the doctor’s discovered the underlying condition of his delayed development, Klinefelter Syndrome (a chromosome duplication disorder).

From that moment forward, the storm winds blew across the landscape of our otherwise picturesque family life. Instead of asking shallow and short-ended “why” questions like me, Kim focused on our Savior rather than our storm. She dove deeply into the process of finding and utilizing every available therapy for Tank (i.e. physical, occupational, and speech therapies). Tank did not begin walking until he was 2 and he did not speak until age 4. Today at 10, Tank is doing great and continues getting occupational and speech therapies. As for his physical development, he is engaged in every afterschool sport offered (e.g., soccer, baseball, football, basketball). I praise God for my wife who refused to get focused on the storm, but instead kept her focus on the Savior who sent the storm and was with her in the storm.

To be sure, there is much mystery in suffering. Yet, we know that our good God is working through our storms and sufferings to bring out the best in us. And the best in every disciple of Jesus is Jesus! Suffering is not something we seek in the process of our sanctification. In fact, whenever possible, it is to be avoided. Our Lord Jesus never went looking for suffering, and in the Garden of Gethsemane He even asked if it were possible to be avoided. In His dark hour on the night He was betrayed, Jesus modeled that it is more desirable to seek God’s will than to seek to avoid suffering.

Let us be clear that it is not the suffering itself that grows us in our faith and conforms us into the likeness of Christ. As I said in the beginning of this lesson, suffering is only the pruning tool that God uses to accomplish His purposes in our lives. Steve Brown says, “God is bringing us to the end of ourselves” to which I like to add, “and

the sooner the better!” Let that truth set the disciple of Jesus free to focus on the Savior in every storm we face. Remember the greatest good in this life is not the absence of suffering, but the presence of our Savior.

#### REFERENCE NOTES:

1. Joni Eareckson Tada, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.
2. Joni Eareckson Tada, *A Place of Healing: Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering, Pain, and God's Sovereignty*.
3. Tim Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, Dutton, 47.
4. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 91.
5. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 89.
6. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, InterVarsity Press, 1973, 27.



## *Driving the Roots Deeper – Questions for Discussion*

1. What does the line in the song American Pie, “*they caught the last train for the coast*” imply about our God as it relates to evil and suffering in this life?

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2. What would be the implications if that line were actually true?

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3. When was the first promise of pain and suffering for the people of God?

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4. Write out one verse that promises problems in this life.

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5. Write out a few purposes for these painful problems.

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6. What is the primary purpose for suffering and pain?

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7. How does beginning with the end in mind help the disciple deal with suffering and pain?

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8. When you squeeze an orange what do you get? (Orange juice of course) When you are squeezed, what do those around you get?

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9. What is your most important take-away from this lesson?

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