

Why Does God Let Us Suffer?

[This is a chapter from my book Dear Young Single Christian, so it speaks directly to their suffering. However, the principles apply in other contexts as well.]

If you've ever been in love, you know it can bring more astonishing joy, and more excruciating pain, than anything you've ever experienced. In the good moments, you're so fully alive and so close to the one you love that it's easy to believe heaven is just one little step away. But when the relationship gets into trouble, or worse, if it dies altogether, your aching heart feels crushed beyond repair. Why can't God just make this whole love business a little easier on us?

There are many ways people interpret, and cope with, the pains life brings. Some people see suffering as the work of our Enemy, part of the evil that came when creation fell. From this perspective, the work of God and the work of His people should be focused on removing suffering—in our lives and in the lives of others.

Let's apply this point of view to being single. Your loneliness is definitely painful, and the solution would naturally be marriage. So you do what you can to find yourself a mate. But along the way you run into other pains: competition, misunderstandings, rejection, and (maybe most of all) the need to face and deal with your own issues.

Some of you keep pushing through these new pains. But others of you step back, and gradually decide it's not worth it, at least not right now. There are other solutions to loneliness, maybe not quite so good, but they're something you can get used to.

You may not realize this, but the Bible has a very different perspective on suffering. Instead of seeing suffering as evil and something to be fought against, the writers of the Bible call it good.

- James says, "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials..." (James 1:2)
- Paul says, "We also glory in tribulations..." (Romans 5:3)
- Peter says, "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you...but rejoice..." (1 Peter 4:12)
- Jesus says, "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you...rejoice and be exceedingly glad..." (Matthew 5:11,12)

Of course, if you read the full texts, you will see that none of these men are saying we should find suffering pleasurable in itself, or that we should try to bring it on ourselves. What they are saying is that suffering produces great benefits, benefits that can really come no other way.

I've counseled with a lot of people who are in pain, and I've discovered that the most common reason they're struggling with their pain is because they're too close to it. In other words, it has become the only thing that really matters to them at that moment, and they have lost sight of the bigger picture. But if we truly want to understand our lives, we need to learn to look at ourselves and all the details of our existence (including our relationships) through the eyes of God.

As I've already explained, God does not see your singleness as a good thing. Nevertheless He can definitely bring good things out of it, and He does. In the same way, He does not see suffering as a

good thing in itself, but He understands the rich treasures that are to be gained in the middle of it, treasures that come in no other way.

One day of course your singleness, like all other sufferings, WILL be over. You may be married here in this life (which, incidentally, will start a whole new round of sufferings of a different sort). Or you may step alone into eternity, where you'll meet the Husband who will make all earthly marriages seem quite insignificant.

Paul said it well in Romans 8:18. "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." This life is such a small thing, and even the worst of its hardships are so very temporary. Nevertheless, our pains are real enough to us now, and God wants us to discover how they can be transformed from something destructive into the stepping stones of grace.

From my study of scripture, I have identified three primary purposes for our existence on earth—three things that God desires to accomplish in us.

1. He wants us first to find Him, and then to get to know Him very well.
2. He wants to work in us, by His Spirit, until our character becomes like that of His Son Jesus.
3. He wants us to be a real-life expression of Jesus, especially to people who don't know Him yet.

What I've also come to understand is that *suffering is always necessary for each of these goals to be accomplished.*

Let's think about how we find God. For those of us raised in a Christian setting, we first learn about Him through our families or in church or through reading the Bible. But "learning about" and "knowing" are not the same thing. I can learn about the apostle Peter. I'll never really know him until I get to heaven.

What it takes to know God is not something we can entirely understand. It involves the very supernatural working of His Spirit, the person of the Trinity who dwells with us on earth. But the process begins with profound, soul-wrenching pain. You see, we must come to realize, deep in our beings, that God is perfect, that we are lost and helpless, and that our evil choices have brought unthinkable suffering on His pure and sinless Son.

Only when we come face to face with the truth of our nastiness do we ever reach out for His goodness. Only when we get a taste of the hell we deserve do we begin to comprehend the redemption He offers. If everything in our life were pain-free, we simply would never get that desperate.

But even after we come to know Jesus as our savior, there is so much more to learn about Him. For example, we need to experience Him as our provider and protector. But how can we discover His provision unless we are in some kind of poverty? How can we know His protection except in the context of danger? How can we know about His ability to comfort or heal, unless we're undergoing some kind of suffering?

From our human view, we might just prefer to avoid the sufferings. But our view, quite frankly, is not what matters. Jeremiah 9:23,24 gives us God's preference, and it *does* matter.

Thus says the Lord:

“Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom,
Let not the mighty man glory in his might,
Nor let the rich man glory in his riches;
But let him who glories glory in this,
That *he understands and knows Me*,
That I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth,
For in these I delight,” says the Lord.

The amazing thing about God's view is that it is truly best for us as well.

You see, those who reject human love relationships because they just might be (well, because they ARE) painful, miss the joys and fulfillments that are only to be found in marriage and family. But glorious as these things are, they are only a faint shadow of the incomparably rich fullness that is found in a spiritual relationship with the One who made us for Himself.

The second place where suffering brings about God's agenda for our lives has to do with the changing of our character. This one is pretty obvious, if you've ever watched a horse being broken or a child being raised. Because of our inherent rebelliousness, laziness, stubbornness, selfishness, and all those other ungodlike “nesses” we tend to want to hang on to, the process of sanctification simply has to hurt.

But God in His love and wisdom devises a personal training program for each of us, what I like to call a “custom-crafted crucible.” He makes things miserable for us in specific aspects of our lives, not because He wants to destroy us, but because He wants to destroy that which actually is *not* us. Hebrews 12:10,11 puts it this way:

[God chastens] us for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. 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.

And finally, suffering is the necessary context for the spread of God's kingdom on this earth. To see how it works, let's go to one of my favorite suffering passages, Luke 22:31,32.

And the Lord said, “Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.”

It is always important to realize that Satan is real, and he really desires to destroy us. Nevertheless, he can do nothing to us without first getting God's permission. In this case, while Jesus *did* permit Peter's trials, He also prayed for his faith to stand strong in the middle of them.

If you know the story in Luke, you will know that it seems Jesus' prayer was not answered. When Peter was challenged by a servant girl and others in a Jerusalem courtyard, he became afraid and denied three times that he was Jesus' follower.

We can only imagine the anguish Peter felt when he realized he had failed his Lord (the Scriptures say he “wept bitterly”). But what Peter did not know was that this was a necessary step for the building of true faith. You see, none of us learn to draw upon God’s strength until we come face to face with our own weakness. Peter not only discovered his personal helplessness, but he also experienced God’s willingness to forgive and restore. God later filled Peter with the Holy Spirit, after which he became fearless of even the most cruel Roman leaders.

God calls all of us to “strengthen our brethren,” and the only way we can do this is to have received God’s strength when we’ve needed it ourselves. In 2 Corinthians 1:4, Paul describes God as one “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.”

Do you see? Unless we suffer, and unless those around us suffer, the kingdom of God does not expand. Perhaps if we still lived in Eden, this method might not have been necessary. But we don’t, and it is.

A young man recently asked me this question:

The girl I thought I was going to marry just left me, and it really hurts. Now I wonder if I was to blame. But even more, it makes me afraid to date anyone else. How can I know if someone can be trusted, that she won’t leave – even after we’re married?

After I explained some of the same things I’ve discussed above, here is how I concluded my answer to him....

I hope you can begin to see that, far from being evil, suffering is in fact the “narrow gate” through which we can come to know God most intimately (see Matthew 7:14). It draws us to Him, it makes us like Him, and it allows us to share His glory as we minister to others.

“All that may be true,” you say, “but how do I deal right now with the intense pain I’m feeling from losing this girl I loved? That bit about a broken heart isn’t just words in a song. It really *hurts!* I’ve tried crying, praying, hitting things, drowning the pain in something else—but it doesn’t go away. I want to find someone new right away, and at the same time I never want to love anyone again. What can I do?”

I want to say something to you that I pray you’ll be able to understand. It might not make sense to your mind, but please see if you can accept it in your spirit. There’s one more thing you may not have tried. I call it embracing your pain.

You see, in spite of the fact you feel like your heart is fractured into pieces, you’re actually still alive. Running from the pain hasn’t worked. Being angry at God—or at her—or at yourself—hasn’t made things better either. But what if the very pain you’re trying to escape holds the key to your healing?

You’ll probably admit that this specific hurt is one of the most intense things you’ve ever known. Even the feeling you had when you were passionately in love wasn’t quite as strong as this. That should be a clue that it has something to do with God.

So rather than running from it or fighting it, see if you can look for God in the middle of it. If you think about it, He has felt far more intense pain than you or I will ever experience. What if He decides to let your hurt stay a while longer? Can you trust Him to keep you alive and breathing and even functioning fairly well in the stuff of your life with the pain still there? Can you find peace in your spirit, even while your mind and body are in torment?

You can. I know, because I have.

And slowly, gradually, dear friend, something miraculous will happen. You will find that you begin to know God better. You'll find yourself more certain than ever before that He's real, that He loves you, and that it's all going to work out. *How* exactly it's going to work out matters less and less. It's His problem now, not yours.

It might also help to realize that the pain you feel won't last forever. This particular ache might even one day disappear, after you find the right life partner. But as you know, some pains never go away, not while we're here on earth. Nevertheless, the Bible promises us that in heaven, it will all be erased.

“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” (Revelation 21:4).

And so you have a choice. You can fight the pain through bitterness or anger. You can do a million things to shove it aside or drown it out. You can harden your heart and never let yourself be vulnerable again.

Or you can let the pain work deeply into your soul, breaking away the fake and selfish and foolish parts of you, and reach out to the God who loves and understands and accepts you, and who will restore you—in His time. And on the other side of this season of suffering you may very well find yourself in a place of new joy that never would have been possible before you allowed God to work this costly change in you.

First, you will have a new freedom from fear. Pain will no longer be a dreaded enemy. Also, you'll have a new ability to trust—not other people, but God Himself. Nowhere does the Bible tell us to trust each other. God alone is faithful and reliable.

In addition, you'll find that because God is real to you, you no longer have to look to your friends, or your girlfriend, or your wife, to be your life-support system. Instead, you'll have more to give them, and in the giving you'll become far closer to them than was ever possible through your neediness.

Best of all, you'll begin to see God's purpose for taking you through everything that's happened. Life will change from a string of hardships to a supernatural adventure. You'll find great joy in watching His kingdom become more visible all the time, regardless of whether life is easy or tough.

Then finally, one glorious day, you'll get to hear those beautiful words, “Well done, My son.” And that will be so *very* worth the pain.

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2009