

2014 Devotionals

by

Diane Woerner

Written for Brentwood Baptist Church
Brentwood, TN

Scriptures taken from the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*

Suffering for Following Jesus

John 15:18-20

If the world hates you, understand that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own. However, because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of it, the world hates you. Remember the word I spoke to you: "A slave is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will also keep yours. –

Hate. Persecute. These are strangely harsh words to bring into this intimate final gathering of Jesus with His disciples. Moments before He'd told them they had been promoted from servanthood to friendship (verse 15). This new status meant they would be given "inside" knowledge, that their lives would produce permanent fruit, and that the Father would give them anything they asked in the Son's name. The only requirement for retaining this promotion was that they would keep His commandment to love each other.

But Jesus was honest with them. Entering the inner circle of fellowship with Him and His Father was going to be very, very costly. They were about to witness the full intensity of the world's hatred for their Master, and He wanted them to know that as His friends they would encounter a similar hatred. They would soon suffer deeply as a direct result of their alliance with God.

When we speak of suffering as a component of our spiritual formation, we usually think of those things we encounter on our way to finding God. None of us really comes to know God except through some sort of crisis, for it is there He reveals Himself as redeemer, comforter, sustainer, healer, and friend.

While we never choose or volunteer for the specific crucibles that accompany our spiritual growth, nonetheless a true follower of Jesus begins to understand their value. Not only do these experiences draw our desperate attention back to God, but they also work to shape our character. In addition, they give us powerful resources with which to minister to others, thus demonstrating God's grace and compassion to a world that often has a hard time seeing Him.

But in today's passage, Jesus is speaking of a different kind of suffering, a suffering that is the direct result of our identification with Him. In this sense we might see these kinds of challenges not as formative, but as proofs. How can we know we belong to Christ? Because the world that hates Him also hates us.

Ours is a generation that is only beginning to grasp what this means. Up until recently we have lived in a nation and time where to be a Christian has generally been considered honorable. Now (although a majority of Americans may still call themselves "Christian"), many of the authentic standards of biblical Christianity are being explicitly identified as "hateful," thus giving people a reason to hate those of us who resiliently choose to live out the teachings of Jesus Christ.

How do we learn to face this sort of rejection, and possibly even more severe persecution in days to come? We learn it in part by embracing the sufferings God permits in our lives along the way. Sometimes God mercifully removes our pain, but it is often evidence of His deeper mercies when He comes alongside us in our pain, giving us the strength to persevere, the courage not to fear and, maybe most of all, an ever-increasing understanding of our calling to be like our Master who endured everything for the joy He knew was to come.

Application

Looking back over your past sufferings, list some of their positive benefits.

- Did you find yourself praying more?
- Did you find yourself searching the Scriptures for answers?
- Did you become less interested in meaningless distractions, understanding what is really important?

Think about the ongoing value of the challenges you've faced.

- Do you have greater confidence in the faithfulness of God?
- Do you see the beauty of the community God has placed you in?
- Are you finding yourself more patient with others who are hurting?

Suffering with Hope

Romans 8:18-25

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us. For the creation eagerly waits with anticipation for God's sons to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to futility—not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it—in the hope that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage of corruption into the glorious freedom of God's children. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together with labor pains until now. And not only that, but we ourselves who have the Spirit as the firstfruits—we also groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. Now in this hope we were saved, yet hope that is seen is not hope, because who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with patience.

All religions have to deal with the question of suffering, and they do this in a variety of ways. Buddhism sees suffering as the result of being too attached to the things and people of this world, and it encourages us to become essentially indifferent to all feelings and relationships. Hinduism teaches that suffering is the punishment for sins committed in a previous lifetime. Other religions see suffering as the result of a struggle between two equal forces, one good and one evil. Christian Science even argues that suffering is nothing more than a mental illusion.

The Bible addresses suffering continually throughout its pages. In today's reading we find an important theme found in the Christian perspective, which is that our suffering exists in the context of great hope. Part of this hope, as we discussed yesterday, comes from our realization that important benefits are gained through the things we endure, especially when we look for God's role and purposes in them.

But Paul describes another aspect of our hope here in Romans 8, which is that our sufferings provide a dark background against which the glorious redemption of creation will one day shine even more brightly.

I think of the story of the blind man in John 9. Here was a man who was born without sight, not because he had sinned in a previous lifetime, or even because his parents had sinned. Rather, this man's hardship was specifically permitted so one day a Nazarene carpenter who happened to be passing by would be able to demonstrate to the community the astonishing power of God—a miracle which (as He explained to His disciples) was on the list of works His Father had sent Him to earth to accomplish.

If we really understood what Scripture means by hope, I think we would find additional nourishment as we struggle through our trials. Hope rises out of a conscious choice to set our minds and hearts on that which is coming in the future. When a woman focuses her thoughts on the baby that will be born, it's much easier to bear the pains of pregnancy and labor. Even more dramatically, Christ endured the cross because He could envision the "joy set before Him" (Hebrews 12:2).

So if what Paul says in Romans 8 is true, that our sufferings can't even be measured on the same scale as the glory that lies ahead, then our prayer should be that God would give us the strength to "eagerly wait with patience" for something we can't quite see yet with our eyes. What we do have is His astonishing Spirit within us, who gives us confidence that our hope *will* become reality and that all our

questions and anguishes and losses will fade away to nothing in the light of the splendors of a Kingdom that is coming very, very soon.

Application

List a few things you're currently hoping for and think about them. Which ones are realistic? Which ones require you to do something? Which ones can happen only if you give up something? Are any of them certain to happen, or are they just wishful thinking?

Then list some of the promises given to us in Scripture and consider how they're different from so many of our human hopes:

- Their fulfillment is based on God's ability, not ours.
- Their primary purpose is His glory, and our benefits are only side-effects.
- God gives us strength and confidence to wait for them with endurance rather than restless impatience.
- They are certain to come to pass.

Our Afflictions and God's Comfort

2 Corinthians 1:3-5

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. He comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of affliction, through the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For as the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, so our comfort overflows through Christ.

It's a mysterious ebb and flow that permeates God's earthly Kingdom—suffering and comfort, suffering and comfort. Without comfort suffering would be unbearable, but without suffering comfort would not exist.

We often think of the Holy Spirit as our Comforter, which He is, but Paul reminds us here that it is actually the Father Himself who is the “God of all comfort.” Comfort starts with the Father, flows through Christ, then through His Spirit, and finally through us to our brothers and sisters “who are in any kind of affliction.”

Suffering can be divided into three general categories. The first is obvious—that of physical pain in all its many forms. The second is mental and emotional pain, found in such things as misunderstandings, social rejection, personal failure, and addictive bondages. And finally there is spiritual pain—the loneliness that comes from losing someone we love, or perhaps even the terrifying fear that life might have no meaning at all.

Having been human, Jesus understands our suffering better than the gods of any other religion. His early life wasn't easy, but His suffering came to a climax on the cross. In those long agonizing hours, Jesus endured excruciating physical torture, along with hunger, thirst, fatigue and cold (remember, Peter had to warm himself by a fire).

He also felt not only the vicious scorn and rejection of His people, but He experienced something beyond our comprehension—the mysterious transfer of all human sin and corruption into His sinless soul. What anguish that must have caused Him!

And then in those final moments, His Spirit cried out with unspeakable terror, when for the first time in all eternity the Trinity itself was torn apart. In the highest possible manifestation of justice, the holy Father turned His back on His sin-laden Son. Christ yielded up His Spirit...and it was finished.

Where does our comfort come from? It comes from the Father who in a very real way bore the hardest pain of all. Because “God so loved the world,” He did what no human father would ever do. He chose to send His beloved only Son to earth, He “was pleased to bruise Him” (Isaiah 53:10), He chose to lay the weight of sin on His shoulders, and He chose in that awful moment to abandon Him.

And for this reason He is truly now the God of *all* comfort, who is able to comfort us in *all* our afflictions and rejections and humiliations and loneliness and fear. Just as the deepest possible pain was endured in our place, the deepest possible comfort is available to us now, as we come to realize that the ebb and flow of all our sufferings and comforts are only ripples spreading out from the foot of a cross that stood long ago on a barren hill called Calvary.

Application

So often our sufferings are intensified by the questions they raise. Why did this happen to me? Why did that person die so young? How could a good God allow that kind of injustice or cruelty?

The Christian answer is the only one that satisfies. Not only does our God not put more on us than He Himself was willing to bear, not only does He come alongside us in our pain, not only does He bring value out of suffering, but He also calls us to look beyond our present life to the glorious eternity that has now been made available to us because of the choices He made.

In the trials and sufferings you currently face, learn to draw strength from these words of Paul:

Therefore we do not give up; even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day. For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory. So we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen; for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

They left everything to follow Jesus

Luke 1:1-11

As the crowd was pressing in on Jesus to hear God's word, He was standing by Lake Gennesaret. He saw two boats at the edge of the lake; the fishermen had left them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, which belonged to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from the land. Then He sat down and was teaching the crowds from the boat. When He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "Put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch." "Master," Simon replied, "we've worked hard all night long and caught nothing! But at Your word, I'll let down the nets." When they did this, they caught a great number of fish, and their nets began to tear. So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them; they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, because I'm a sinful man, Lord!" For he and all those with him were amazed at the catch of fish they took, and so were James and John, Zebedee's sons, who were Simon's partners. "Don't be afraid," Jesus told Simon. "From now on you will be catching people!" Then they brought the boats to land, left everything, and followed Him.

It began so quietly, this great calling of the Master's disciples. Certainly the small group of fishermen was aware of something unusual—so many people crowding around, and early in the morning at that. But they were really too tired to think much about it. It had been a long and discouraging night with nothing to show for it. As they cleaned the debris out of their nets, their thoughts were probably on their soon-coming sleep.

Oh dear. Someone has gotten into one of the boats. What is this? You want to speak to the crowds from my boat?

And so began the long path of sacrifice for Peter and his two companions. At first Jesus asked only a small thing of him—to borrow his boat for an hour or so. But the next request was a little harder. "Put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch." It may have taken a minute for Peter to process this: deep water, my just-cleaned nets...a catch??

Or maybe by this time Peter, who of course had had a front-row seat during Jesus' sermon, was beginning to realize that this was a very extraordinary situation—and a very extraordinary Man. "Because it's You who's asking, well, yes. Yes, I'll do that."

And thus it was, when Jesus presented Peter, James and John with His third and hardest request—to leave everything and follow Him—He didn't really even have to ask. They had heard His words, and seen His miraculous power on display. And somehow their bodies were no longer weary. Everything had changed.

When we hear the word 'sacrifice,' our immediate thought is deprivation, if not pain. It's something that requires us to brace ourselves, hold our breath, shut our eyes—and look forward to having it behind us.

But when Jesus calls us to sacrifice, it's a different thing altogether. In some ways it's much, much harder, for we are asked to give up something precious—our possessions, our time, our families, our very lives—not just for a short time, but forever.

What we need to understand is that these acts of sacrifice, whether small or large, are really stepping stones from one world into another. Peter and his friends went from being fishers of fish to fishers of men. But in a larger sense, they were transitioning from the temporal to the eternal.

Many months later Jesus explained this to them in more detail. Here is Matthew's account.

Then Peter responded to Him, "Look, we have left everything and followed You. So what will there be for us?" Jesus said to them, "I assure you: In the Messianic Age, when the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne, you who have followed Me will also sit on 12 thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses, brothers or sisters, father or mother, children, or fields because of My name will receive 100 times more and will inherit eternal life." (Matthew 19:27-29)

From the banks of Galilee to the thrones of heaven—that was the calling Jesus offered these fishermen. While each of our callings will be different, when we can understand sacrifice not as loss but as the necessary pathway to infinite gain, it will change everything for us as well.

* * * * *

There is a natural human tendency to mentally anticipate the trajectory of our lives and callings. We presume to understand what God has in mind for us, and as a result we attempt to mentally "pre-live" the challenges we think may be headed our way.

But in stories such as this one, it is clear that God calls us into a vast unknown. In His wisdom, He knows we cannot self-prepare for that which we can't see. Our task is rather to learn relinquishment and trust.

As with Peter, our fumbblings and failures are as important as our successes, if not more so, for only as we come to know both our weakness and His sufficiency will we be readied for the tasks He has laid out for us (see Ephesians 2:10).

But as all true followers of Christ eventually discover, to lose our lives for the Kingdom—whatever that looks like in our everyday circumstances—is to gain joy and satisfaction far beyond anything we might have devised for ourselves, both in this world and in the world to come.

Application

Our willingness to sacrifice is directly connected to our realization that God's ways are best and that He does all things well. How does this motivate us to a deeper study of God's Word, giving extra attention not only to the "happy" stories but also to the more painful ones?

Can you trace a pattern of increasingly harder testings in your own life, including a call to greater sacrifice? Why is this a reason for encouragement?

Costly surrendering of His will to the Father's will

Mark 14:32-42

Then they came to a place named Gethsemane, and He told His disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James, and John with Him, and He began to be deeply distressed and horrified. Then He said to them, "My soul is swallowed up in sorrow—to the point of death. Remain here and stay awake." Then He went a little farther, fell to the ground, and began to pray that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him. And He said, "Abba, Father! All things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me. Nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will." Then He came and found them sleeping. "Simon, are you sleeping?" He asked Peter. "Couldn't you stay awake one hour? Stay awake and pray so that you won't enter into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Once again He went away and prayed, saying the same thing. And He came again and found them sleeping, because they could not keep their eyes open. They did not know what to say to Him. Then He came a third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The time has come. Look, the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up; let's go! See—My betrayer is near."

No one saw what took place during those few lonely night hours in a small grove of olive trees just outside Jerusalem. No one, that is, except all the hosts of heaven. They knew what Peter could not have understood, that the greatest battle in all of eternity was being fought a few yards from where he and his friends were sleeping.

No other battle will ever compare. When Michael and his angels battle Satan in heaven, ultimately casting the hoards of demons down to earth (Revelation 12:7-9), it will be a lesser victory. When the armies of the earth gather for the final confrontation at Armageddon, less will be riding on the outcome. Nor does the most devastating war yet known to human history touch the significance of the struggle engaged in by one Man on His knees in prayer.

Mark tells us that Jesus prayed three times. Rather than seeing this as three tries before He finally relinquished His will to that of the Father, it's more likely that He was dealing with three layers of sacrifice.

First, of course, was His need to say yes to the most horrific torture and death imaginable. Jesus was not unaware of the physical price He would soon pay. Every component of bodily suffering was included: thirst, fatigue, cold, bruising, the laceration of the flesh, lack of oxygen, and much more, all drawn out over many indescribable hours.

His torture also included emotional pain. He was mocked and ridiculed and spit on, a supreme insult in that culture. His closest friend denied Him with curses. He was hung naked before a jeering crowd, and He knew that among that crowd was also His own mother. How deeply this son must have felt her anguish in that hour!

Yet all of this suffering was borne by the human Christ, and in that sense it was suffering any other man could have experienced as well. But there was a second sacrifice required, one that none of us will ever understand. Jesus approached this altar as a pure and spotless Lamb, but was laid upon it carrying the guilt of all humanity.

The only grasp we have of this transaction its foreshadowing in Leviticus 16:21-22. “Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, confess over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel...putting them on the head of the goat, and shall send it away into the wilderness....The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to an uninhabited land.”

The final component of Christ’s sacrifice was the hardest: the choice to receive His own Father’s rejection. We have faint hints of this pain when we encounter human separations, but nothing in our lives compares with the bond of love between this Father and Son, and thus nothing touches the agony of its severance.

What made these costly sacrifices so valuable? The answer lies again on three levels. On the human level, Christ’s willingness to suffer in our place purchased for us both exemption from God’s wrath and a restored relationship with our Creator. For Jesus Himself, His sacrifice purchased His future bride.

But God the Father had the most to gain, for in His Son’s choice to obey this hardest of requests, God’s unparalleled power and unfathomable love were tested and proven to be unshakable to the farthest reaches of the universe and across the full expanse of eternity. The greatest battle truly resulted in the greatest victory.

* * * * *

It is no coincidence that Jesus calls His followers to our own places of sacrifice. While we never touch the magnitude of His sufferings, we nevertheless are mysteriously required to “fill up what was lacking” in His afflictions (Colossians 1:24).

Several things in the Bible’s account of the Gethsemane struggle are helpful to us. First, Jesus’ sacrifice was not self-chosen, but rather was accomplished in specific obedience to His Father. We are not being asked to build our own altars, but simply to accept willingly those God puts before us.

Also, we see that in the hour of His trial, Jesus’ request to His friends was *not* that they pray for Him. Rather, He asked them to watch and pray for their own protection, that in their close proximity to His battle they too would not “enter into temptation.” In His consistent focus on their need, Jesus avoided the possibility that their sympathy might further weigh against His choice to obey. It is important to realize that God does not promise our friends the grace to carry *our* assigned burdens, only theirs.

And finally, in Luke’s account we learn that in the middle of our Savior’s deep anguish, “an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him.” When in obedience we walk this path of sacrifice, we will experience supernatural sustaining that we could otherwise never know. This is the glory of sacrifice—not the giving up, but the gaining of that which is eternal and precious and which is ultimately honoring to God.

Application

While both involve pain, sacrifices are different from trials in that they are optional. How do our sacrifices help to prepare us for sufferings we have no choice about?

What sacrifices have you made which, looking back, you can see as being something God has used not only for spiritual growth in your life, but also for the advancement of His Kingdom? How might you encourage others to view sacrifice as valuable and even necessary?

Joseph's Flight to Egypt

Matthew 2:13-15

After they were gone, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Get up! Take the child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. For Herod is about to search for the child to destroy Him." So he got up, took the child and His mother during the night, and escaped to Egypt. 15 He stayed there until Herod's death, so that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled: Out of Egypt I called My Son.

Why doesn't God make life easier? Why don't things go more smoothly? Joseph and Mary had already experienced significant inconvenience when they had to travel many miles just before Jesus was born. Why now the middle-of-the-night flight to Egypt? Why the awkward, inefficient, even wasteful turns in their life—and in ours?

We live in a culture that operates on an unspoken principle called pragmatism. This is the idea that the things we believe and do should be evaluated by their practical outcome more than by their conformity to any external standard. Essentially pragmatism says don't waste time, don't waste money, and especially don't waste energy. Find the most efficient, easiest way to get the job done.

One of the things a good student of Scripture soon figures out is that God is NOT a pragmatist. In many ways He's unexplainably extravagant. Think of the millions of flowers in remote places that bloom unseen every year. But more often it seems that He takes a lot longer to get things done and makes things a lot harder than they need to be—at least from our point of view.

We can't know His mind completely, but a major criterion for His decisions—particularly concerning the events that surrounded the life of Jesus on earth—seems to be a desire to connect those events in the earthly life of His Son to the vast array of Old Testament prophecies.

Thus, as Matthew reminds us, the flight of Joseph and Mary to Egypt was not a misstep. Instead, as with so many details of the Gospel records, it was a necessary fulfillment of prophecy. In God's plan, Jesus had to be "from" three different places.

First, He was from Bethlehem, the city of His forefather David. Then, as today's text quotes from Hosea, He needed to be "called out of Egypt." And finally, when His family settled in Nazareth, that fulfilled a third prophecy, that He would be called a Nazarene (Matthew 2:23).

So even in this early chapter of Jesus' life, we find that the hateful plotting of an evil man served only as a tool to accomplish the precise plan of God for His Son's time on earth. If we will allow the weight of this truth to displace our instinctive pragmatic assumptions, it can in fact bring a new peace and confidence to our own lives.

Paul put it simply: "All things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28). God's "good" is not our efficiency, but rather His glory. And it seems He is sometimes most glorified in circumstances that from our human view appear to be inconvenient and humiliating and painful, but which from the view of eternity in fact demonstrate the absolute wisdom and righteousness of His sovereign rule.

Application

“‘My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ says the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8). But Psalm 119:2-3 tells us that those who seek God with their whole heart will be able to walk in His ways. In what aspects of your life do your “ways” match His and not those of the world around you?

Among the fruits of the Holy Spirit are peace and patience. How do these help us to rest without worrying when God’s timing or God’s circumstances go against our pragmatic inclinations and habits? How do they make it easier to obey when God calls us to our own “night flights to Egypt”?

Inconsolable Grief

Matthew 2:16-23

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been outwitted by the wise men, flew into a rage. He gave orders to massacre all the male children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, in keeping with the time he had learned from the wise men. Then what was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; and she refused to be consoled, because they were no more.

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, “Get up! Take the child and His mother and go to the land of Israel, because those who sought the child's life are dead.” So he got up, took the child and His mother, and entered the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned in a dream, he withdrew to the region of Galilee. Then he went and settled in a town called Nazareth to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets, that He will be called a Nazarene.

Who can endure inconsolable grief? This horrific, senseless slaughter, born out of Herod's jealousy and fear, brings a somber counterpoint to the joy of the Christmas story. God enters history to redeem mankind, and the fallen heart of humanity lashes back to destroy Him.

So what do we make of these and other similar dark pages of Scriptural history? Must we conclude that God is weak...or wasteful...or wicked? Many believers are inclined to simply leave God out of it. When Adam sinned, the earth was cursed. The many sorrows of humanity are simply the inevitable repercussions of the Fall.

But then there's the matter of prophecy. Not only was this evil deed foretold by Jeremiah, we are told over and over again by the Gospel writers that it was necessary for the prophecies—all of them—to be fulfilled. This speaks not of God's indifference or helplessness, but rather of a deliberate, carefully wrought plan.

What does one do in the face of inconsolable grief? Our passage today implies that the mothers in Bethlehem, like Rachel of old, “refused to be consoled.” So let's look at the verse Matthew is quoting: Jeremiah 31:15. “Thus says the Lord: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.’”

We first notice that Jeremiah is not referring to the actual Rachel. Rachel, Jacob's wife, had two sons, and because she died giving birth to her second son, Benjamin, she never actually had to deal with their death. Rather, Jeremiah's “Rachel” is a figurative mother whose children, the Benjamites, were taken from Jerusalem and held in the city of Ramah before being led into Babylonian captivity (see Jeremiah 40:1). When he spoke that prophecy, Jeremiah had no idea it would be fulfilled so literally in his day.

But more important are the verses that follow (31:16-17). “This is what the Lord says: Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for the reward for your work will come—and your children will return from the enemy's land. There is hope for your future—and your children will return to their own territory.”

This brings us to the realization that grief can be consoled. We can *refuse* to be consoled, but in fact God does offer consolation for those who will choose to turn to Him. It is not the consolation of removed pain, but rather the consolation of infused hope.

Herein lies the secret for those who decide to trust the goodness of God in the face of seemingly senseless evil. Rather than allowing our pain to permanently overwhelm us or to make us bitter against God, we can learn to lean into Him. Nothing in our lives—not our possessions, not our successes, not even our children—is sufficient to satisfy the spiritual emptiness only He can fill.

So when in His sovereignty He chooses to remove those things we did not know we could live without—and we find ourselves alone with Him—it can be the entryway to a hope we would not have known had grief not been His portion for us.

Application

Think of several people you know who have a deep relationship with God and strong confidence in His power. If you don't already know their stories, ask them to tell you how they have discovered His faithfulness through the things they have suffered.

It's important to remember that grieving is not sinful, but refusing to allow God to comfort you out of bitterness or anger or doubt can separate you not only from His benefits but also from Himself. Begin to look for God's presence and purposes even in the small hurts or disappointments in life and you will find yourself better prepared when faced with more severe suffering or loss.