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Conversion of Saul: A Lesson on Suffering, Pt 4

Acts 9:23-31

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SermonAudio Blurb: In this extended series on suffering and trials we explore the nature of God's discipline upon sinning believers. This is often a misunderstood aspect of our relationship to our heavenly Father and yet the bible is replete with examples and instruction regarding it. In this final message we consider the way God brings trials and hardships into the life of a believer to grow them. In a very real way we will learn that it is in and through adversity that our faith both matures and is purified.

I. Introduction.

- A. Turn to Luke 13.
- B. Today we finish this short series on suffering and trials in the life of a Christian.
 - 1. We saw in Acts 9 how suffering for the name of Jesus Christ is something God specifically called the apostle Paul to as a life. But it is also the call of all Christians, though the level of suffering and the length may differ in each.
 - 2. Then we considered the cause of all suffering—the presence and dominance of sin in this age in which we live and act.
 - 3. Then we looked at how we are to respond to a suffering as a direct result of sin and folly. Illegal and foolish actions bring natural consequences. Jump off of a high cliff and you will fall. This is not divine discipline but simply how God has hardwired this world we live in.
 - 4. Then, last time we met we considered discipline that is from the hand of the Lord. This is where God takes a sinning, wandering child of His and brings discipline. This is much more than simply consequences, this is where the Father intervenes in a very painful but life-changing way in the life of a wandering believer.
 - 5. Today I want to close out this series with a time of contemplation on trials and hardships in general in the life of a believer.
- C. A point of clarification: The idea of trials and suffering break down basically into only two categories:

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1. Note that I am not speaking of suffering and trials for the non-Christian. These have similarities but there is no sanctifying work in them. Meaning they are not connected to growing into maturity as a Christian.
2. The first category is suffering specifically because you are a Christian.
3. The second is all other suffering. There is a lot of overlap between natural consequences, the discipline of the Lord and trials in general. Where one begins and the other ends is almost impossible to discern.
4. Ultimately, all trials and suffering for a Christian flow out of a faith in Christ.
 - a. They are not the means to faith. Nor are they the focus of faith.
 - b. Rather they are natural consequences of faith in Christ. They are key means of God to both purify and mature your faith in the only thing that matters, Christ.
 - c. We tend to focus on the mercy and patience and kindness of God that when suffering strikes we recoil in shock, though we ought not.
5. Luke 13 lays a good theological foundation that helps unveil hidden assumptions that we carry in our hearts.
 - a. Read 1-5.
 - b. How can God stand by while this tower or this slaughter takes place upon innocent people? They had done no wrong yet their life is ripped from them and their loved ones lose them forever.
 - c. But notice how Jesus answered them. Do you think that these people were worse sinners than you? And in saying this He reveals what they are assuming. And we often assume when we see a tragedy. We try to make sense of it and think, “Perhaps they were guilty of something we don’t know about.”
 - d. His answer is brutal. No. And you too will suffer this reality unless you repent. But in reality what He is doing is showing them that they are asking the wrong question.
 - e. The correct question each of them, and us, should be asking is, why are we still alive? Why do we still enjoy much peace? Why are we not afflicted and broken down in all ways?

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- f. Sin brings suffering. But sin more importantly brings judgment that is eternal. And unless Someone comes to take my sin and yours, we too shall suffer in an eternity in hell simply because we are sinners.
- g. So get this into your heads. Suffering is actually the story of redemption.
 - (1) It is the story of the Son of God suffering as a man like us. A man of no honor, pursued like a rabbit by hounds seeking to devour Him. A man who was lied about and lied to. A man betrayed by a friend. A man denied by another. A man whipped, mocked and nailed to a cross. A man who died in a horrific manner.
 - (2) But in this suffering He was also redemptive. Not for Himself, but for those He came to save. He took their sin and the horrid, eternal consequences upon Himself and suffered in their place.
 - (3) We are redeemed by His suffering. We are healed because of His stripes. We are brought to true life through His death.
 - (4) And when we believe in Him He bids us to walk in the path He walked and share in His sufferings.

II. Suffering through sickness or hardships.

- A. This is the most common aspect when talking about suffering and the Christian. All of us are familiar with this.
- B. James 1:2-4.
 - 1. One command is given in this passage—it is one of considering, regarding, or counting. And it is not to the Church at whole, but to the entire Church individually.
 - 2. “All joy” is in emphatic position.
 - 3. It is unmixed joy. “All” here captures the idea of unmixed with conflicting thoughts.
 - 4. Note the inevitability of trials, “when” not “if.”
 - 5. These are difficult, complex trials.

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6. He quickly moves from command to help in understanding the “why” behind the command (3). He tells them what they know already and then what they don’t know.
 - a. “Knowing” here speaks to the why of these trials. It is something they know already. They understand this part due to experience they already have.
 - b. Secondly, he tells them what they need to know.
 - (1) Endurance is not the goal and it is not enough to count trials and suffering as nothing but joy. An unbeliever can do this.
 - (2) Let this time of enduring come to its proper end, let it come to completion. The command here is to continue in patient enduring so that the goal can come about.
 - (3) The goal is "perfect and complete."
 7. This is why you must order your mind to count it nothing but joy when you fall among trials. God ordains them to move you to maturity. Elsewhere, Paul would say that you are being conformed into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ.
 - a. An unbeliever can endure much.
 - b. Only a believer can find joy, pure joy, in enduring much suffering because it will bring about what his heart yearns to be, more like Jesus.
- C. 1 Peter 1:6-7.
1. On the surface this passage sounds like James, but it is actually focusing on a different aspect of suffering and trials.
 2. Peter begins his letter to the scattered Christians by reminding them of the great saving work of the Father through the death and resurrection of Christ and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. (3). But even before reminding them of these truths he tells them in vs 1 that they are chosen to be strangers in this age we live in.
 3. In this new birth we have certain privileges that we must learn to know and cling to, especially in difficult times:
 - a. You have a living hope. (3b)
 - b. You have a permanent inheritance (4).

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- c. You are protected (5).
 - d. When you rightly grasp the full truth attached to these points then you will learn to rejoice in the midst of trials.
 - e. “In this” points us to those previous verses.
4. “Even though now, for a little while, if necessary you have been distressed by various trials.” Let’s break that down to enjoy the things that are hidden in this verse.
- a. “Various trials”
 - b. “Distressed”
 - (1) These trials cause us distress and grief.
 - (2) Now this is something you need to understand. Because this idea of being distressed shows that the trials attack at the surface, the physical and emotional realms— but not your affections.
 - (3) That is what happens in these trials, the emotions are attacked and challenged, but if you have developed deep, godly affections, then you are able to rejoice, for your affections are built upon the truths of the prior verses.
 - (4) But even as you rejoice you will often weep.
 - c. “If necessary.”
 - (1) This means that not everyone will have to suffer as others do.
 - (2) In fact it tells me two things:
 - (a) First, trials will come into my life only if they are part of the sovereign plan of God. Therefore I cannot resent them, but understand that God knows that they are necessary. This is so comforting to me.
 - (b) Second, trials come and go. Sometimes they are necessary, and other times they are not. So don’t lose heart, God will give you times of rest.
 - d. “Even though . . . “
 - (1) The words here in the Greek are strongly saying that these trials are short in duration.

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- (2) In fact they are emphasizing the fact that it is for only a little while. How long? Perhaps unto death, but compared to the eternity that awaits, it is but a short time.
- 5. But now we come to the core of the issue of why they are to rejoice. Now the testing that occurs through this suffering is that your faith would be proved genuine.
- 6. Peter uses the picture of the refining process of gold to explain the purpose of our sufferings here on earth.
- 7. Now notice the future looking aspect of verse 7.
 - a. We bear under the current trials because we are looking to our future reward when Christ comes.
 - b. We will then receive praise, glory and honor.
- 8. Now this time of rewards and blessing comes at the revelation of Jesus Christ (8).
 - a. When the world looks at us do they see us as joint heirs with Jesus? No.
 - b. They see us as many things, but not for who we really are.
 - c. How about Jesus? Do they properly understand who He is? No. They see him as many things but not as they ought to view him.
 - d. Beloved, when Christ has come and we are revealed to be who we really are alongside Him, everything we suffer for His name's sake with fade away into glory.
- 9. This is all held together by the glue of the love for Christ. Notice that true faith holds on to its source (8ff).
 - a. You see, when you have the faith that man can generate it will ultimately fail, because it finds itself focused on what it has done and hopes in that.
 - b. But the true faith of God that is a gift to us does not fail. Your faith is actually strengthened in those desperate times.

III. Conclusion.

- A. The over-arching truth to suffering for a Christian is that it is never vain and worthless. God is in the midst of it as the One disciplining you into repentance or pressing you into maturity or purifying your faith until it rest fully upon the sufficiency of Jesus Christ alone.

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1. To say it another way, suffering is always redemptive in its purpose for a Christian.
 2. Jesus Christ promised us that in this world, in this age of sin and death, you WILL have tribulation. “. . . BUT take courage; I have overcome this world.”
 3. How? In and through the way of the Cross. Listen to Isaiah, *“He was despised and forsaken of men, A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; And like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him”* (53:3). If this is our Lord’s calling in this world, then it is our calling as well for we can never rise above our Master.
- B. But there is one simple response consistent through all of these points and types of trials and suffering—remain, abide, and endure.
1. Simple response but hard to do when your mind is not at rest in the sufficiency and faithfulness of God.
 2. The Father brings discipline and hardship for your good.
 3. The reason is because you are bought with the blood of His Son—as He is the Beloved of the Father, so too are you.
 4. And the power and ability to remain and endure in the midst of suffering will be found in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Benediction

May our merciful God and Father open our eyes to the glory and vastness of His love toward us through Jesus His Son. May we see ourselves seated with Him in heaven as recipients of His grace. And may God grant us through the Spirit, eyes to grasp the many good works He has called us to love and do. Amen